No. 47 5 CENTS

# Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

With a sudden heave, the young Rough Rider swung Tornado Tom clear over the railing of the porch and dropped him on the other side.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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# The Young Rough Rider's Wildest Ride;

OR,

Jack Halcock

# CLEANING OUT A WHOLE TOWN.

By NED TAYLOR.

## CHAPTER I.

### AT THE PHOENIX HOTEL.

It was a warm afternoon, and a group of eight or ten men were seated on the porch of the Phœnix Hotel, the principal hotel of the town of Simson, Arizona.

There was not very much going on in the town, and the men who were lounging about on the easy-chairs on the porch were on the lookout for something to take their attention and interest them.

Consequently, when a stranger to the town, whom no one there had ever seen, dropped off his horse and marched up on the porch, every eye was turned in his direction.

This stranger was a person who was well worth anyone's attention.

He was a boy, still in his teens.

He was clad in a close-fitting uniform of khaki cloth, cut after the military fashion, with leather leggins and a brown sombrero to match.

He was a handsome fellow, with brown hair and brown eyes and a face which showed the rosy hue of health under the tan that it had received from long exposure to the sun and wind.

He was well built and athletic looking, and, in spite of his evident youth, he looked like a fellow who would be well able to use the revolver that hung at his hip.

This was Ted Strong, the young rough rider, far famed through all the West as a champion sharpshooter and horse breaker.

A year ago he had come West to run a ranch, and had organized a body of boys, known as the young rough riders, for the purpose.

So successful had the young rough riders been in their ranching operations, that Ted Strong, their leader, had won considerable fame throughout the border. None of the people in the Phœnix Hotel knew him, and they all looked at him curiously.

Ted Strong paid no attention to the numerous eyes that were turned upon him.

He had ridden into Simson for a purpose, and he was at the Phœnix Hotel on business.

That business was to see a wealthy ranch owner named Meyers, who wished to sell him a herd of cattle, and had

promised to meet him at the Phœnix, either that evening or early the following morning.

The young rough rider saw his horse taken around to the long stable in the rear of the hotel, and, after ascertaining that Meyers had not as yet arrived at the hotel, and probably would not get there until the following day, sat down in one of the vacant chairs on the porch.

At the table close beside him two or three rough-looking men were playing poker with a young fellow who, from his dress and manner, seemed to be an Easterner who had come to the West to see what the life there was actually like.

The others were men who had evidently lived in the West all their days.

They wore the clothes that cowpunchers generally wear, but the young rough rider sized them up as fellows who would prefer to hang around a hotel for what they could pick up in the way of free drinks and gambling, than work honestly for their living on a ranch.

The game seemed to be going against the young Eastern fellow.

An empty whisky glass stood in front of him, and it was evident, from the flush in his face and the unsteady look in his eyes, that he had been drinking rather more than was good for him.

He was a nice-looking young fellow, too, rather handsome and refined, with a look of honesty in his face.

After a glance or so cast in his direction, the young rough rider knew that he had fallen into the hands of a gang of sharpers, such as are to be found at all the Western hotels and road houses, and who were simply trying to fleece him of all that he had.

The young rough rider would have liked to interfere and warn the young man, but he knew how dangerous a thing of that kind might be.

Ten to one the young fellow would get angry at the interference, and would pay no attention whatsoever to the warning.

Then, without any doubt, the others would immediately start a row.

They were all armed, and the young rough rider knew how easy it is to start a shooting affray in a place like this.

He knew no one there, and the rest of the people on the porch would side against him at once if their appearance was to be taken as any indication of their character.

Ted determined to watch the game as closely as possible, to detect any crooked work, if he could.

Later on, when the Easterner was alone, he could tell him of the mistake that he had made in playing with such men.

He soon found, however, that he was not to pursue this course.

He had not been sitting there for more than five minutes before one of the men, a large, powerfully built fellow, turned around and looked him over from head to foot.

The young rough rider did not return the glance.

He thought that perhaps it was the object of this man to pick a quarrel with him, and he did not wish to give him any opportunity for that.

After trying in vain to catch Ted's eye for a moment, the man spoke to him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but would you mind telling me if you are the young fellow they call the young rough rider?"

"Ted Strong is my name," said the boy. "Some people call me the young rough rider."

"I thought I recognized you from the description that I had heard of you. I am glad to meet you. My name is Tom Dunton—some of the folks call me Tornado Tom. I'm the foreman at the Double X Ranch, down country a little way."

"Maj. Rainsford's ranch?"

"Yep; that's the place."

"I have heard of it before."

"We'd be glad to have you take a trip down that way any time you had the chance. I'm glad to make your acquaintance. Won't you have a drink with me?"

"I don't drink," smiled Ted.

"Yer foolish," articulated the young Easterner, with a hiccough. "'Sno fun in life 'f'y'do'n' drink."

"You'll have a drink with me—a drink of something or other, just in celebration of our meeting," said Tornado Tom.

"Sure," said the young fellow. "He'll have a drink. I'll have another."

"I'll have a seltzer lemonade, or something of the kind, but nothing stronger," said the young rough rider.

"Well," said Tornado Tom. "We'll have to let it go at that. I want you to shake hands with my friends here."

He introduced the three others who were at the table.

The two Westerners were introduced as Jim Fry and Sam Roper.

The Easterner was Launce Whipple, lately graduated from Harvard College, and come out for a trip around the West, with the intention of starting in the ranching business.

"He's a tenderfoot, of course," said Tornado Tom, as he introduced him. "But we are breaking him in, and he will soon learn the ropes out here."

"It's his first trip West," said Fry. "We're jest showing him how things is done out here."

"He don't need much breakin' in," said Roper, slapping Whipple on the back. "He's one of the boys already."

"Tha's right," hiccoughed Whipple. "I'm one of the boysh, all ri'."

By this time the waiter had appeared with the drinks.

The Westerners and Whipple tossed off their glasses of red liquor at a mouthful, drinking it raw and following it up with a "chaser" of water.

This is the Western way of drinking, and Whipple was trying to learn it, although the fiery liquor, gulped down in that fashion, brought the tears to his eyes.

"We were having a little game of poker," he said. "Will you join us?"

"You come in to see Meyers, I expect," said Tornado Tom. "He won't be here till to-morrow. He told me that he expected you down, but he did not think that he could get here so soon. He said he thought that he might make a sale to you."

"Maybe he will if his cattle are as good as I have heard they are," said the young rough rider. "I bought a lot of ranch stock in Mexico for my Texas ranch, but that is not enough. I am on a still hunt for more."

"Then you have nothing to do in the meantime. Why not join us in a quiet, little game."

"Come on," said Fry. "We just need another to make the game lively."

"Tha's ri'," said Whipple. "Come on in, and I will win your money."

Ordinarily the young rough rider is very much opposed to gambling and does not believe in it at all.

But in the present instance he seemed to have set aside his scruples, for some reason or other.

"Certainly," he said, with a smile. "I was just thinking that I did not know how to pass the time away. I'll be happy to join you."

"Here's a chair for you," said Fry, patting an empty one that stood beside him.

"I think that I will sit on this side," said the young rough rider. "I don't like to have the sun shining in my eyes."

He took his own chair, and, pushing it in near Whipple's, sat down on it so that he had the sun behind him and was facing the three Westerners.

"Who's deal is it?" he asked, picking up the cards and shuffling and cutting them briskly.

"I dealt las'," said Whipple.

"Then it is my deal," said the young rough rider. "Here goes."

He began to deal the cards with a rapidity that astonished the others.

Tornado Tom Dunton had heard about the young rough rider, and had also heard that the boy knew nothing of card playing, and was opposed to it.

The fact that the boy had refused to drink anything stronger than lemonade convinced Dunton that he was no gambler.

He judged from what he had seen of men that drinking and gambling generally go hand in hand.

He thought when he invited the young rough rider to play that Ted would refuse altogether, or else prove such a poor hand at the game that there would be no trouble in the world in deceiving him.

Now the dexterity with which the young rough rider handled the pasteboards amazed him.

Ted had shuffled them so fast that the eye could not follow the movements of his hand, and now he dealt them with the same lightning rapidity.

The game began.

There were no chips on the table, as the limit had been taken off the game before the young rough rider came into it. There were piles of greenbacks and little heaps of gold and silver in front of every man.

They were playing with a dollar "ante," and the young rough rider himself produced a roll of bills to go into the game with.

Fry opened the betting.

He had drawn three cards.

The young rough rider had drawn one.

Whipple had drawn none at all.

The betting was pretty brisk.

Tornado Tom dropped out at the first round, as did the young rough rider.

Fry and Whipple went on raising each other, until there was several hundred dollars in the pot.

Then Fry saw the last raise of Whipple's and threw down his cards.

"It's my pot," he said. "Three of a kind."

"Wait a minute," said Whipple, in drawling tones. "Look at my hand."

It was a full house.

The tenderfoot had won the pot.

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## CHAPTER II.

### WHIPPLE CONTINUES TO WIN.

The three Westerners stared at each other as the half-drunken Eastern youth raked in the money that had been piled up on the table.

They had been winning from Whipple for an hour, but at one fell swoop he had recovered all that he had lost.

They stared at the young rough rider.

He had lost a dollar, but nothing more, and he seemed to be paying no attention to which way the money went.

Fry dealt the cards this time.

He shuffled them for a long time, and started to deal them without the formality of a cut.

But the young rough rider reminded him of this, and cut the pack.

This time the young rough rider won, but it was a small pot, five or six dollars—no one there having a good hand.

Then it came Tornado Tom's deal. He also would

have dealt without cutting, had not the young rough rider stopped him.

This time Ted won again.

At the next deal Whipple won again. and at the next deal but one which was Ted's he raked in a pot of three hundred dollars.

After this Fry leaped to his feet.

"I've had enough of this," he cried. "I don't want no more of it."

"I'm broke," said Roper, rising, also, and glaring at the young rough rider.

"Be a sport!" said Whipple, with a maudlin smile, stuffing his money into his pocket.

"And lose all our dough to a couple of tenderfeet!" said Fry.

Ted Strong had not yet risen from the table.

He pushed his chair back and looked at the others.

"If you are ready to go on, I am," he said, quietly. "If not, I am perfectly willing to quit."

"With our winnings," said Roper.

"On the contrary," said the young rough rider, "I break even. I lost a little and won just enough in the one small pot that I raked in to make it good."

Tornado Tom seemed to have kept his head a little better than the others.

He cast a glance that boded no good at the young rough rider.

"Sit down, fellers," he said. "We'll play another round or two."

"Are you ready fer more?" he added, turning to the young rough rider.

"Certainly," said Ted. "I don't believe in gambling, as a rule, but I guess that I can stay in this game as long as the others."

"Tha's ri'!" said Whipple. "Be a sport!"

Fry and Roper gazed at the young rough rider in a way which seemed to indicate that they would much rather have played without him, but they did not say anything more.

They sat down again, and Tornado Tom dealt the cards.

The young rough rider did not insist upon a cut this time.

He did not back his luck very heavily, and he lost.

Fry pulled in the pot.

The cards went from hand to hand, until the round was completed again.

This time both the young rough rider and Whipple, whom he had been watching narrowly, broke even—neither won nor lost anything.

It was Tornado Tom's deal once more.

He shuffled the cards and tossed them out.

Then the play began.

He backed his hand, as did everyone else, till there was quite a stack of bills and coin in the middle of the table. When there was a show down, Tornado Tom threw down his cards. He had four of a kind, four deuces.

He started to rake in the coin, but the young rough rider laid his hand on his arm before he could draw in the money.

"What's the matter?" said Tornado Tom, staring at him with an ugly frown upon his face.

"Just look at my cards," said the young rough rider.

Tornado Tom glanced at them. The young rough rider had four of a kind—four threes.

"I beg pardon," said Tornado Tom. "The pot's yours."

He started to shove the money over to Ted, and at the same time tried to throw his own hand into the discard.

But again the young rough rider reached forth and held his arm.

"What's the matter?" said Tornado Tom. "What are you pawin' me that way for?"

"I want you to look at my hand."

"I have looked at it."

"Look at it again."

"I see it; there's four trays. It's your pot."

"Take another look at it."

"Why should I?"

"Because I say so."

"I saw the four cards."

"There are five cards there."

"But the fifth don't count—you have the pot."

"I have the pot, but the fifth does count."

"How does it? Four trays wins."

"The fifth counts a whole lot. Look at it."

"I see it."

"What is it?"

"A deuce—but that makes no difference."

"It makes a whole lot of difference. Look at your own hand."

"What's the use of this tomfoolery?"

Tornado Tom pushed his own hand away from him face down, but still it had not been mingled with the other cards.

The young rough rider saw Roper reaching for it.

"Hands off, Roper!" he said, in such a loud voice that Roper started and drew back.

"Mr. Whipple," continued Ted, in softer tones, "will you kindly take Torando Tom's hand and spread it out on the table, face upward, so that all may see it."

Whipple was not so drunk but that he could tell that something unusual and serious was taking place.

He had heard often how shooting affrays had arisen out of card games in the West, and the memory of these things that he had heard served to sober him up a good deal.

He did what the young rough rider had asked him to

—took the five cards and turned them face upward on the table.

There were four deuces and a king.

"Now," said Ted, "you see that there are four deuces in that hand. The fifth card in my hand is a deuce. Five deuces altogether. That is one too many for one pack."

Tornado Tom had grown pale suddenly.

Now he grew red in the face just as suddenly.

"What do you mean, you cub?" he growled. "You have been cheating."

"Have I?"

"Yes; you have been stacking the cards every time you cut."

"Maybe I have, but it was for a purpose."

"Well, it's a darn queer move."

"There are other moves that are queerer than that."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

The young rough rider looked his man squarely in the eyes.

"Five deuces don't come into a pack because the cards are stacked or arranged in any particular way."

"You oughter know how they come in better than me."

"I know just as well as you do."

"If this here is a joke, it's a darn poor one."

"It isn't a joke. How did that fifth deuce come in there?"

"You know, I guess."

"Do you want me to tell."

"Yes."

"It came out of your sleeve."

"What does yer mean?"

Tornado Tom would have risen to his feet, but the young rough rider bore down so firmly on his arm that he could not get up for the moment.

"I'll show you how it came into the pack. Here!"

There was a lightning-like movement on the part of the young rough rider.

He ran his hands along Tornado Tom's arms.

Out of the loose sleeves of his coat several cards came tumbling.

They fell on the table, so that all could see.

"We, I'll be hanged!" said Whipple. "He has been cheating me."

Tornado Tom now leaped to his feet, in spite of the detaining hand of the young rough rider.

"You young hound!" he cried. "What kind of a trick are you trying to play on me?"

"This kind," said Ted, coolly.

As he spoke, he reached for the belt of the foreman and seized the revolver that hung there.

He did not draw it out of the belt.

There was a quick movement of his hand and a tinkling sound on the floor.

Then the young rough rider stepped away from the ranch foreman.

A cheer arose from the bystanders, who had all risen to their feet and drew back when they saw that there was likely to be a fight.

The tinkling sound had been caused by six cartridges which had slipped to the floor.

That sudden movement of the hand had made Tornado Tom powerless to shoot, although the revolver still hung in his belt.

What Ted had done was simple enough, when you come to think of it, but it was a thing that few people think of.

He had "broke" the revolver of the foreman in the middle and the automatic ejecting apparatus with which modern weapons are fitted had thrown the cartridges out of the gun.

Tornado Tom was too astonished for a moment to stir.

In the meantime, his two companions, Fry and Roper, had risen to their feet and were moving close to the young rough rider.

Ted cast a glance at them.

"Don't stand behind me," he said. "I might turn and fire at you."

He had not drawn his weapon.

It still hung at his belt, but all there knew that the young rough rider was famous the West over for the skill with which he could draw and fire when occasion demanded it.

Fry and Roper moved away in a hurry, stationing themselves behind Tornado Tom.

Roper had picked a heavy club from a corner of the porch, and now held it in his hand.

Fry had a revolver at his belt.

He drew it, but let it hang at his side.

"You die for this, young feller!" said Tornado Tom, in a husky voice, looking steadily at the young rough rider.

"Take care," said Ted. "I have not my pistol out, but it will come out in a second. I don't want to get into a fight here. I went into that game for the purpose of preventing you from cheating that Eastern boy. I have done it. I don't want to fight, but, if necessary, I will do it. But remember that you are unarmed."

"Unarmed, am I?" grated Tornado Tom.

As he spoke, he swung out his left hand, which had been concealed behind his back.

In it was a gleaming revolver.

The young rough rider understood now why he had stood still so long.

He was waiting until Fry should step behind him and hand him a fresh weapon.

This was what had happened, and he now had the young rough rider covered.

Ted had been too slow in drawing his own revolver.

Tornado Tom raised his weapon and covered him!

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## CHAPTER III.

### TED STRONG'S STRENGTH.

The young rough rider saw that he had no chance of drawing his own weapon.

If he did so, he knew that Tornado Tom's finger would crook around the trigger and send a bullet through his breast.

He had disarmed the foreman, but he had not counted on one of his friends passing him a revolver in this way to him.

These thoughts passed through his brain with lightning-like rapidity.

At the instant that the foreman leveled his revolver, the young rough rider had decided how he was going to act—and he acted.

With a leap like that of a wild cat, he sprang at the big fellow.

Tornado Tom was too surprised to fire.

He had never expected this.

Before he realized what had happened, the young rough rider had grasped him and lifted him clear from the floor.

With a sudden heave, Ted threw him over the railing of the porch to the ground beneath.

There was a yell of astonishment.

The others saw Tornado Tom hurled into the air, and landing on a heap on the ground outside.

They had all heard often of the young rough rider, but they had never imagined that the boy had the tremendous strength required to perform this feat.

At the same instant, Roper had stepped forward with a club in his hand.

It was evidently his intention to steal up behind the young rough rider and hit him over the head with it.

But Ted seemed to have divined what was going on behind his back.

He wheeled around at the same instant that Tornado Tom struck the ground.

To his great astonishment and surprise, Roper found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver which the young rough rider had flashed out as he turned.

"Step back, gentlemen," said Ted, pleasantly, with a smile on his face. "I would like to have a little breathing space about me."

The people on the porch had been closing in on the young rough rider, but when they heard this, they dropped back in a hurry.

"Good!" said Ted. "Now, gentleman, if anyone happens to feel like pulling out a weapon, let him get away from here before he does it. The first movement in that direction will bring a shot from me."

Several hands had been straying toward revolver butts. but when the young rough rider said this, they dropped empty to the sides of their respective owners.

In the meantime, Tornado Tom had clambered to his feet.

Although the young rough rider had not appeared to be doing so, he had been watching him closely.

Now he spoke to him in a clear, loud tone that he could not fail to hear.

"It will only take me a minute to wheel around in your direction and fire," he said. "If I see you trying to pick up that gun that lies on the ground there, I intend to see how quickly I can do it."

The revolver which had been passed to the ranch foreman had fallen from his hand, and now lay on the ground at his feet.

He had been stooping to pick it up when the young rough rider spoke to him, but at the word he straightened up.

"Won't you come back on the porch?" said Ted. "I am sorry that you had to leave it so suddenly."

Tornado Tom had been a good deal shaken by his fall. He had plenty of friends on the porch, but at present there was no doubt but that the young rough rider had the drop on them.

He hesitated for a minute.

The tables had been turned on him so suddenly that he did not know what to make of it.

There was an ugly scowl on his face, but he had had too much experience in the way of gun fights not to know that it would be a very dangerous thing to try and rush the young rough rider at the present moment.

He moved over toward the railing, and finally clambered over it onto the porch.

He moved around behind the young rough rider, but Ted checked him.

"In front of me, please," said the boy. "I want to be able to look at you."

Tornado Tom stepped around in front of him, and the young rough rider looked him squarely in the eye.

The foreman had recovered a little from the shaking up that the fall had given him.

"Look here," he said. "You think you are pretty smart trying to run things in this town, but we are going to give you a lesson."

"I'm in a position to give the lessons at present," said Ted, making his revolver click.

"Are you? You think because you have that gun out, thet you have the drop on the whole town. You never made a bigger mistake in your life."

The people had crowded in behind Tornado Tom.

He seemed to be a natural leader among them.

There was an angry growl from them at this point

"And the people of Simson don't allow youngsters like you to come in and raise a row like that which you have just started," went on the foreman.

"That's right," said one; "we don't stand for that."

"Tar and feather him!" said another.

"Run him out of town!" shouted a third.

There was an angry movement among the men who were clustered behind the ranch foreman.

The young rough rider saw that they were all hostile to him.

It seemed a desperate situation.

There were a dozen men there.

He was alone.

He stepped in to the wall of the house, so that he would have a look at all of them and began to sight his revolver at the breast of Tornado Tom.

"The first move against me that I see," he declared, "and I'll pull the trigger. You all see where it is aimed for."

There was silence for a moment, and then an unexpected thing happened.

A figure stepped out of the crowd and stood close beside the young rough rider.

It was Whipple, the Eastern youth who had been the victim of the Westerners in the game of cards.

He whipped out a bulldog revolver, of a short, stumpy pattern, and leveled it at the crowd.

"I'm with the young rough rider," he said. "And if you want to fight him or run him out of the town, you'll have to fight me."

"Don't be a fool, Whipple," said Tornado Tom. "Don't butt in where you have no call to be."

"I'm just in the place where I ought to be," retorted Whipple. "I was drunk before, but I'm sober now. I'll back Ted Strong up, through thick and thin."

When Whipple said that he was sober, he was telling the truth.

The flushed look had left his face. He was pale now, but he was determined looking.

The quick turn that events had taken, the peril that he saw this daring boy, who had befriended him, was in, the discovery that he had been acting like a fool in playing with the foreman and his two associates, had combined to act on his nerves suddenly and sharply.

He was now quite sober.

The revolver that he gripped firmly in his hand was one that a cowboy or rancher would have laughed at.

It was short in the barrel and smaller in caliber than any of the Western weapons.

It would have been useless in the open or at a range of any length, but at close quarters it could be a very dangerous weapon in the hand of a cool and determined man.

Whipple seemed to be both cool and determined.

"I'm with you to the finish," he said, glancing at the young rough rider. "You did me a good turn, and I'm going to stand by you."

Ted did not look at him at all.

He kept his eyes fixed on the men in front of him.

At the same time he spoke to Whipple under his breath.

"Keep your eyes on those fellows," he said. "If you don't, you will be knocked down. They will rush in on you when you are not looking."

Ted's warning was a good one, but Whipple was unable to take it in time.

Even as the young rough rider spoke, a couple of men dashed forward at him.

Ted's weapon flashed, and one of them fell back with his hand shattered.

The other raised his weapon to fire at Whipple, at the same time grasping the Eastern boy's revolver in his right hand.

Ted fired again. The fellow's weapon fell to the ground, and he yelled aloud with pain.

The young rough rider had shot him through the arm.

But Ted's anxiety to protect Whipple left him open to attack.

Tornado Tom leaped at him like a tiger.

Others followed.

He was thrown on his back on the ground, and, although he struggled, the press of men was so great that he was powerless to do anything.

The weapon was twisted from his grasp, and he was disarmed entirely.

At the same time a fellow smashed Whipple on the side of the jaw.

He fell in a heap, apparently stunned.

For a moment Ted felt as though he were being smothered.

It seemed as if everyone about the place was the friend of Tornado Tom, and as if they had all joined in the attack upon the young rough rider.

One man was sitting on his chest.

Another was holding his arms.

A third had him by the throat and a fourth was pinioning his arms.

"Let him up," said Tornado Tom, in husky tones. "Let him up, and let me look at him."

They began to climb off the prostrate boy, and presently the young rough rider was lifted roughly to his feet and stood against the wall.

Two men still had hold of him, and Tornado Tom had a weapon in his hand now.

"Now, you see," said the foreman. "You see what comes of butting in."

"You'll see what comes of it," said the young rough rider, "as soon as I get a chance to speak to your employer."

"Yah!" jeered Tornado Tom. "If you think that Bill

Rainsford will fire me on the word of a whippersnapper like you, you're mistaken. You don't know Rainsford, son."

"I may not know Rainsford. But I know that if he does not act, I will."

"What'll you do?"

"Turn you over to the sheriff."

The foreman laughed jeeringly.

"You're making a big mistake, son. if you thinks you can clean out this town. I come as near bein' the sheriff of this place as anybody does, I reckon."

"Then it's time the place had a new sheriff."

"Is it? We'll see. You didn't know when you butted in that these fellows here were all men on my ranch. Did you?"

"No; I didn't. I thought that they looked more like a lot of cattle thieves."

There were yells from two or three of the fellows at this remark and there was a clicking of revolvers.

It was evident to the young rough rider that this gang, into whose hands he had fallen, ran the whole town of Simson, and that there was something in the charge that they were cattle thieves.

Tornado Tom turned angrily to his men.

"Keep your guns where they belong," he said. "I'm goin' ter do all ther shootin' necessary at present."

Crack!

A shot was fired even as he spoke.

It came from Whipple, who lay on the ground.

He had been apparently unconscious, and no one had thought it worth the while to remove the revolver which had been dropped on the floor within his reach.

It came near putting an end to Tornado Tom there and then.

A thought lower, and it would have hit him on the head.

Two men leaped upon him at once.

One kicked the revolver out of his hand.

"Tie him up with a lariat," said the foreman, taking off his hat and looking at the hole in it. "I'll make him pay for that later. At present my business is with the other fool."

A moment later Whipple was bound hand and foot.

Tornado Tom next turned his attention to the young rough rider.

"Tie him to a post," he said. "I'm going to try some shooting on him. When he leaves here, he'll have a piece shot out of each ear, so that he'll have something to remember us by."

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## CHAPTER IV.

### UNEXPECTED HELP.

Ted had no chance to struggle.

Held, as he was, hand and foot, he could not move a limb, and, although he felt the coils of a lariat being twisted around his body and drawn tighter and tighter, pinioning his arms to his side, he could do nothing to prevent it.

When the men, who had thrown themselves upon the young rough rider and held him down with their weight, arose from him, he was tied hand and foot and absolutely helpless.

Ted was lifted to his feet and stood up with his back against the wall.

He could see Whipple lying a few feet away from him, bound hand and foot.

He glanced at the crowd of men who had gathered in close behind Tornado Tom.

There was not a single friendly face in the whole lot of them.

The proprietor of the hotel was there, as well as several others, who looked like honest men to the young rough rider.

Ted spoke to them.

"If there are any decent people in this town, they won't stand and see this sort of thing," he said.

"Won't they?" said the ranch foreman, glaring savagely at the young rough rider. "I'll tell you something, young fellow, right here and now, before we go any further. As well as being the foreman of the Rainsford ranch, I'm the marshal of the town of Simson, do you understand? And the boys here are ready to back me up in everything I do. Isn't that right, boys?"

There was a hoarse murmur of assent from the crowd.

"You see that I have the public feeling with me," went on Dunton. "I am an officer of the law here, and it is my place to take care of any ruffians who ride into this town and try to pick quarrels here."

"I wasn't trying to pick a quarrel here, and you know it very well," said the young rough rider.

"Wasn't you? Well, we thinks that you was. We have heard of the young rough rider, and how he was famous for his shootin' ability. We were ready to treat you all right as long as you remained peaceable, but when you started in to open up a shootin' match, then we think that it is time to take you in hand."

"You know very well that I made no attempt to start a shooting match."

"You picked a quarrel with me, and you'll be punished for it. When you leave the town of Simson, you'll learn that it isn't a wholesome place for fellows like you."

"And when I come back to the town of Simson, I'll clean the whole place out, and teach the people here that they must respect the laws."

"Don't you worry about that. The people of the town of Simson haven't any use for fellers like you."

"I dare say that they had not. I had always heard that it was one of the toughest towns in the West, but I had never heard that it was a place like this."

"You've found out something that you didn't know

before, then," sneered Tornado Tom, "and you'll find out some other things before you leave the place. You'll find out how it feels to be tarred and feathered and ridden around the town on a rail. You will also find out how it feels to have a piece shot out of each ear. Tie him to the post, boys. I always told you that if the young rough rider ever come to this town, he would find out that he had bit off rather more than he could chew if he tried to rough-house any around here. Tie him to that post, and I'll mark him."

Ted realized by this time that he was in the hands of one of the toughest gangs in the United States.

Simson was one of those towns, now happily a thing of the past for the most part, where the lower and evil element rules things, and when people inclined to decency and fair play are in such a small minority that they can do nothing.

It does not take long for self-respecting and law-abiding citizens to move out of such a town, where their life is unbearable, and the town becomes worse and worse, until a United States marshal or some outside force cleans it out.

Ted had heard that Simson was a town of this stamp, but he had always believed that the stories about it were greatly exaggerated.

He knew that there were one or two prosperous ranches near the town, and he thought that the owners of these ranches would help to keep the place respectable.

Now he found out that he had made a mistake.

He was dragged over to one of the posts of the veranda and tied to it.

His arms were pinioned fast to his sides, and his ankles were tied together.

Two or three lengths of the rope were passed about his body and the post, holding him fast to it.

He could move his head a little from side to side, but that was all.

Twice, without appearing to do so, he strained hard at his bonds, striving to break them.

But they were made of new, stout rope, and he soon saw that his efforts would result only in cuts on the wrists and ankles.

Tornado Tom stood opposite to him, a few paces away, and looked at him with a sneer on his face,

"I've heard a lot about all that the young rough rider could do," said he, "but I guess that he can't do very much at present. I'm going to shoot a piece out of your ear, young fellow. If you don't want to get a hole shot in your head, you had better keep it mighty still. That is my advice to you."

The ruffian drew from his belt the revolver out of which the young rough rider had thrown the cartridges, and started to reload it with fresh ones from his pocket.

Ted could see from his face that he was determined to carry out his threat.

There was no apparent way by which he could avoid being the helpless target for this villain.

There was no one there who could help him.

Whipple, the only one who would have thought of doing so, was lying bound, as powerless as himself.

In a moment Tornado Tom would fire at him.

He would either shoot him in the head and kill him, or mutilate him in the horrible manner that he had threatened.

It was a terrible prospect.

But the young rough rider showed not the faintest sign of fear.

His eyes were as brave and steady as ever, his face had not even turned pale.

Tornado Tom finished the reloading of his weapon, and looked up at the boy.

"Now," he said. "This here is the revolver that you were so smart with. You are going to see some shooting. Here goes. This hits to one side of your head, but doesn't touch you."

He leveled the revolver, and for a brief portion of a second the young rough rider looked into the black muzzle.

Then it spouted fire.

Crack!

Splinters flew from the wooden pillar close beside the head of the young rough rider.

Dust blinded his eyes.

He was almost deafened by the sound of the bullet striking the wood so close to his ear.

He had not been hit, however.

Those who were watching said that the young rough rider did not seem to wince when this shot was fired at him.

He did not try to duck his head to one side, but remained looking fearlessly at the man who had fired at him.

"Pretty good shooting, eh?" said Tornado Tom.

"You'll find that it is the worst piece of shooting that you ever did in your whole life, before I get through with you," said the young rough rider.

"Oh! You are still making threats, are you? We'll try a shot on the other side."

Crack!

He had fired again, and this time the splinters flew out of the wood close to Ted's left ear.

It was plain that this Tom Dunton was a good marksman, villain though he was.

He could place the bullets just where he wanted to.

There was a sort of muffled cheer from the bystanders.

They were applauding the good shooting.

They never thought of the cowardice and brutality of the act.

"I've shaved pretty close to your ears on both sides,"

said Tornado Tom. "Now you know that I can shoot when I want to."

"I know that."

"You know that I could kill you dead in a minute."

"I know that you would not dare any such thing."

"You do, eh? I guess that you know a whole lot of things that aren't so. But I don't want to talk about that. I have you in my power now, haven't I?"

"Just at present you have."

"Yes; just at present and as long as I choose to keep you. I run things in this town."

"You seem to, at present."

"And I could shoot you to pieces if I wanted to."

"Try it, if you want."

"Oh, I know that you have plenty of grit. No one ever accused the young rough rider of a want of that. But that isn't the point. I don't like to shoot a young fellow who is as plucky as you are."

"Don't you?"

"No; although you did butt in where you had no call to butt in, I am willing to let you go on one condition."

"Name it."

"That you get on your horse and leave Simson at once, and that you give me your word that you will not come back here or try to clean out the town later on."

"I came here to buy cattle from Meyer."

"I know it. And when you go you must promise not to see Meyer or buy his cattle. We have a reason for wanting Meyer not to sell at present."

"And if I give you these promises, you will let me go free?"

"Yes."

"How do you know that I will keep them?"

"I have always heard that the young rough rider kept his word."

"I might break it this time."

"I'll risk it."

"And supposing that I don't give these promises?"

"You are crazy if you don't. You are in my hands."

"Never mind about that. I might refuse anyway. What will happen if I refuse?"

"What will happen if you refuse? I tell you what will happen. I'll shoot chunks out of each of your ears, to begin with. You know that I can do it, too. Then we'll strip you, and give you a lashing. I guess by that time you will be ready to give any promise I want. We'll torture you till you do promise. I think a coat of tar and feathers will help you to promise anything."

"You think so. But supposing it doesn't?"

"Then you'll never leave this town alive."

"So that is the proposition that you have to make to me?"

"Yes."

"And you are waiting for my answer to it?"

"Yes."

"Well, here it is: I refuse to make you any promise of any kind. When I get free, as I surely will, I'll come back here and clean out the whole town. I defy you to do your worst!"

The young rough rider had raised his voice suddenly, and spoke in ringing tones.

There were cries of rage from the people who had been bending forward to hear what he said.

Tornado Tom leveled his revolver.

His face was working with rage.

"You dog!" he said. "You have defied me! I am going to leave my mark on you now for life!"

He sighted the weapon, and the young rough rider looked fearlessly into the muzzle.

His finger crooked on the trigger.

Crack!

It was not Tornado Tom's weapon that had fired, but another.

It was fired from somewhere out in front of the hotel.

And the person who fired it had fired with unerring aim, for the bullet struck the ruffian in the forearm, inflicting a flesh wound and making him drop his weapon with a scream of pain.

Ted could not see the person who had fired this shot.

It came from behind him, and he was tied to the post so that he could not turn his head.

He could see, however, that the people were all looking in that direction with astonishment.

Then a voice sounded close behind the young rough rider.

It made him start with surprise.

It was clear, sweet and ringing.

But it was unmistakably the voice of a girl.

"Get back there, every one of you!" said the girl, "or I will fire again. Tom Dunton, what does this mean?"

Dunton was nursing his wounded arm.

His revolver was lying on the ground where it fell, and he was making no attempt to pick it up.

He muttered curses under his breath, but it was apparent that he had no intention of returning the shot that had wounded him.

The young rough rider heard a light step on the porch, and then the girl, who had evidently fired the shot, and whose voice he had just heard, stepped upon the porch.

Ted looked with interest at the person who had saved him, but even had there been no especial reason for doing so, he would have looked at this girl a second time.

She was about sixteen, with blue eyes and brown hair.

She was dressed in a suit of fringed buckskin, which fitted her to perfection.

She was neither stout nor slim, and had a figure that was nearly perfect.

Unlike most beautiful girls, however, she seemed to be as active and strong as a boy.

There was a grace and lissomeness in her figure that could come only from exercise in the open air.

In one hand she carried a revolver, and she swept it in front of the crowd of people on the porch so that they fell back before her.

Then she turned to the young rough rider, and drew out the hunting knife that still hung at his belt.

With one stroke she severed the cord that bound his hands, and a moment later the boy was free, the cords falling off him on the floor of the porch.

"Now," said the girl, "there is your horse. Go!"

She thrust her revolver into his hand, and pushed him toward the steps.

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## CHAPTER V.

### TED STRONG'S WILDEST RIDE.

It is not the nature of the young rough rider to run off and leave anyone in the lurch, particularly when the person is a girl.

At present he was bewildered and surprised at the sudden turn that events had taken.

He could not imagine who this girl was, or why she had chosen to interfere this way in his behalf.

As she spoke to him, she pushed him toward the steps, but he did not go at once.

Tornado Tom was still groaning with the pain of his arm.

But when he saw the young rough rider free, he started forward, with a terrible oath.

This time it was the revolver in the hands of the boy that cracked.

Tornado Tom tossed his arms into the air, and fell forward on the porch.

There was an angry growl from the other people.

They surged forward toward the young rough rider.

The girl whipped out another revolver and leveled it.

She spoke to Ted without looking at him, but still keeping her eyes fixed on the crowd in front of her.

"Ted Strong," she said, "get on your horse and ride as fast as you can. I am safe here. These people will not touch me. But they will kill you."

"Who are you?" asked Ted.

"Never mind who I am. Go and save yourself."

Ted hesitated.

He saw Whipple lying bound on the ground, and bent over and cut his bonds loose.

At the same time a chorus of cries was arising from the people whom the girl had covered.

"Run past her, boys!" said one of them. "Bessie Vernon has no call ter interfere this way with us."

"Take the revolver away from her!"

"Run around behind the house!"

"Don't hurt her, but disarm her!"

These were the cries that arose from the ruffians as they edged forward upon the girl.

They did not daunt her in the slightest.

"The first man that tries to get this weapon away from me dies!" she said. "Don't dare to lay a hand on me!"

"We cain't let the young rough rider outer here arter what has happened," said Roper. "Yer sees he has killed Tornader Tom."

"I hope he has. He deserves it. And he is going out of here," said the girl.

"He cain't. He'll run the whole gang of us in."

While this conversation had been going on, the young rough rider had been assisting Whipple to his feet.

He saw already that the girl was known to these rough men, and that she was respected by them for some strange reason.

He did not try to explain it, but he knew that her advice to get out of there as soon as possible was good. At the same time, he did not mean to take it and leave Whipple behind in this outlaw town. Whipple was numb and sore from the effect of his bonds, and could hardly stand, but he started down the steps with the young rough rider.

As Ted turned to leap after him, he saw that he had been a little too late in taking the warning.

Whipple's horse and his own had been standing at the snubbing post of the hotel, but already a couple of men had sneaked around the back of the house, to avoid the girl, and were running toward the horses.

The young rough rider fired, and one of them dropped.

The other kept on.

"Run for your horse, Whipple!" shouted Ted, dashing forward himself.

He grasped the reins of one of the horses, and wheeled it around.

"On its back!" he shouted to Whipple. "As fast as you can!"

Whipple tumbled into the saddle, and was off.

At the same time revolvers cracked from the hotel.

The girl had apparently been able to hold the ruffians in check no longer.

Ted reached for the other horse, and at the same instant, Fry, the man who had been running toward it, grasped the bridle with one hand, drawing a weapon with the other.

The revolver was pulled out of his hand before he could level it.

The barrel was shoved into his face so hard that he staggered backward.

The horse started off in affright, with the young rough rider leaping along beside it and holding to the mane.

A moment later Ted had vaulted into the saddle, and had thrown himself forward on the neck of his beast.

It was well that he did so.

A volley of revolver shots rang out, and a half-dozen bullets sang over his head.

He clapped spurs into the sides of his animal, and was off like the wind.

At the same time men came streaming out of the hotel, cursing and yelling.

Ted could hear a clatter of hoofs as they mounted and started after him.

He did not stop to look which way he was going.

Whipple was riding ahead of him, and he followed in the same direction.

Looking back, he could see that six or seven were already mounted and stringing out behind him, according to the varying speed of their horses.

From them came a wild chorus of shouts and a scattering fire of revolver shots.

The girl who had saved him was nowhere to be seen.

Ted had got a considerable start of his pursuers, and was still out of a fair range for revolvers.

But he could see that one man, on a black horse, was gaining on himself as well as on the others.

He checked the speed of his own animal a little, and allowed this black horse to come a thought closer.

At the same time he swung his revolver about, and covered the man with it.

The horseman saw what he was doing.

He spurred his own horse ahead, at the same time drawing his weapon.

The others were far behind.

It looked as if it were going to be a duel between these two.

Ted's pursuer fired first, and he fired with a good aim.

The young rough rider could feel his hat give a sudden quiver as a bullet tore through it.

He fired himself an instant later.

He hit the black horse on the shoulder.

It staggered and lurched to one side, but it did not go down.

The rider spurred it, and it continued the pursuit, although at a slower gait.

"That fellow won't come so close again in a hurry," the young rough rider muttered, as he put his weapon back in his belt. "Now the thing to do is to catch up with Whipple, who has a start on me."

He let the reins hang loose on the neck of his animal, and it flew along like the wind, for it was still fresh and in good condition.

He could see Whipple a little distance ahead of him, riding away for all he was worth, spurring his horse and striking it with his hat to urge it to top speed.

"If he treats his horse that way," muttered Ted. "It won't last very long. This chase looks as if it might be a good long one, too, from the appearance of things. Those fellows have fresh horses, and they will try to overhaul us in the long run."

Ted's horse was a speedier one than the one ridden by Whipple, and in spite of all the Easterner's efforts, the young rough rider drew close alongside of him a few minutes later.

Ted then checked the speed of his horse a little, and the two galloped along side by side.

"Ease up on your horse, there," said Ted. "You'll wear him out in no time that way."

"Those fellows behind——"

"Will catch you sure if you tire your horse out."

"I want to get out of sight of them."

"That won't help you any. They will follow your trail. In this country you can't help leaving a trail, and you can rely on it that those fellows know one when they see it, and know how to follow it."

Whipple cast a glance behind him, checking his animal a little.

"We are drawing away from them," he said. "They are away behind now."

Ted looked back.

The figures of the horsemen were out of sight altogether for a moment, then they suddenly appeared, topping a rise, sharply outlined against the sky.

They were all riding in a bunch—not strung out, as they had been before.

"We are pulling away from them, sure," said Whipple. "All we need is another burst of speed. They have about given it up by this time."

"Don't you believe that," said the young rough rider. "They are holding in their horses."

"How do you know that? They are so far away that I can't see what they are doing. You don't mean to say that you can see that they are checking their horses, do you?"

"No; but I know that they are holding them in, all the same."

"How can you tell that?"

"By the fact that they are all riding in a bunch, close together. If each man was urging his horse to go at its best speed, they would all be strung out along the road. No two horses have just the same speed in them when they are put to it to do their best. If they were running after us as fast as the horses would go, some of them would be traveling quicker than others, and they would be all strung out in a long line, with the speedy ones in the lead and the slow ones bringing up the rear."

"I see. And what do you think they have pulled up for?"

"They intend to make a long chase of this. This is a very deserted country here. One might go fifty miles without seeing a soul. They will chase us all the way across the county, I dare say. They want us to tire our horses out so that they can catch us finally. Perhaps they have some idea of taking a short cut, and heading us off somewhere. The country is broken from this on, and

there is a likelihood that they have some scheme of that sort in mind. But now I intend to ask you some questions"

"Ask away."

Whipple was not a particularly good rider.

He jounced up and down in the saddle painfully as his horse jumped along.

But there was nothing the matter with his pluck and courage.

"Do you know anything about this part of the country?"

"I know that it is just waste land up here. Don't you know anything about it?"

"No; I came the other way. I came from the railroad on the other side of the town. I had no chance to head back that way. If I had tried to ride back through the town, I would have been shot sure."

"I guess that's right. It's a bad town. I don't know anything about this place here. There is a river ahead of us somewhere."

"There it is," said the young rough rider, pointing ahead to a clump of trees. "That timber means that there is water there. Whatever the river is, I think that we'll have to cross it."

"I don't see those fellows behind," said Whipple. "Maybe they have given us up."

"I saw them turn to one side around one of those hills that we passed," said the young rough rider. "It was a short cut. I can see that now, from the way that trail we have been following has wound."

"And they will come out ahead of us?"

"No, behind us. We passed the place where the two trails join again. But there is no time to be lost. The sooner we get across that river, the better. Let your horse out again. They'll be after us any minute. The horses are rested a little now. They are not breathing so hard."

Even as the young rough rider spoke, a chorus of yells and revolver shots that rang out behind told that he had been right.

Six men had ridden suddenly out of a side pass.

They were close behind the two boys now.

They had taken advantage of a short cut, as Ted had thought that they would.

They were decidedly within revolver range now, and their pistols rang out in a regular fusillade.

Bullets sang over the heads of the two boys as they leaned forward in their saddles and urged their animals along.

Bullets hit the dust on all sides of them and whistled past their ears.

Ted knew that unless he could ford the river that lay ahead before the others got any closer, he would be at their mercy.

If they were near enough to do any really good shooting, he and his companion would be entirely in their power.

The river was close ahead of them now.

It flowed between banks which rose ten or fifteen feet high at points, but at others sloped down till they were level with the water.

It was not very wide, but the young rough rider could tell that it was deep and swift.

Attempting to swim a horse across this seemed a very risky thing.

The men behind never thought that he would try it.

They set up a shrill cry of triumph.

They thought that they had the two boys cornered.

But they did not know Ted Strong.

He drove the spurs into the sides of his horse, and headed it straight for the river bank.

Whipple had been trying to check his animal, but when he saw the young rough rider spur past him, he followed.

They struck the river at a point where the bank was not more than five feet high.

Both horses were terrified, and they took the leap.

Splash!

They were in the water, under it for a moment, the horses kicking frantically and the riders doing all they could to keep in the saddle.

The stream was cold as well as swift.

For a moment the young rough rider felt himself chilled to the bone.

His horse struck out for the opposite side, but the current caught it and carried it down.

Whipple came close alongside.

For a moment they were spun around in a sort of a whirlpool.

At the same time yells on the bank and a shower of bullets in the water around them showed that their pursuers had come to the stream, and were firing at them.

But the young rough rider and his companion were halfway over now.

Although they were being carried down the stream, they were making good headway.

Ted glanced back, and could see that the men who had been chasing them were riding along the bank.

Not one of them had had the courage to spur into the stream as the young rough rider had done.

Ted felt his horse touching bottom.

Then he lost it again, and was swept down further and further.

The banks were so high that there seemed no chance of the horses finding a footing.

The pursuers whom they had left behind yelled with triumph, and ceased their fire.

They thought that the young rough rider and his companion would surely be drowned in the swift torrent,

and they rode down along the bank to see the end when it came.

Ted's horse was growing weaker.

Glancing at Whipple, the young rough rider could see that his steed was scarcely able to keep its head above water.

It seemed as if they were both to be carried away by the current.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### THE CAMP IN THE MOUNTAINS.

For a moment Ted Strong thought that he would be forced to leave the saddle and swim for himself.

He was about to call out to Whipple to do the same, when his eye caught, a little further down, a point where, for a few feet, there was a sandy bottom on a level with the surface of the stream.

He pointed it out to Whipple.

"Head for that!" he cried. "We'll make it there."

Ted's horse made a last great effort.

It seemed that it was going to be swept past.

Then its feet touched the pebbly, sloping bottom.

A moment later it was striding out of the river.

Whipple's horse was not so fortunate.

It touched bottom, and then was swept clear of it again.

Whipple uttered a shrill scream, but the young rough rider, turning in the saddle, managed to catch the bridle.

He pulled hard on it, and that pull was just enough to make the horse try it again.

It touched bottom, and a moment later was climbing out of the water.

They trotted along the bank, dripping and shivering.

On the other side they could see the men who had pursued them.

They were gathered in a group at the edge of the stream, but none of them dared to enter it.

They opened fire again with their revolvers, but the distance was too great for correct fire, and there was little danger for the young rough rider.

Presently they all wheeled about and started down the stream at a trot.

"They're gone," said Whipple, shaking the water from his clothes. "We've given them the slip."

"Not yet," said the young rough rider. "If I am not mistaken, they are going down to some point where the stream can be forded with more safety than here. There is not time for us to lose. That is about the wildest ride that I ever took, but it is not over yet."

He started off again at a brisk trot.

Whipple followed him.

Their horses had both had a little breathing spell after their swim, and seemed actually fresher now than when they had entered the water.

The country through which they now rode was rather different from the district on the other side of the river.

On the banks of the stream there was a growth of cottonwoods and live oak.

Further back there was a thick tangle of mesquite, mingled here and there with the Texan or Mexican chaparral.

Rising out of this growth of underbrush were a number of low foothills.

Further on could be seen the outline of a range of mountains.

"There is no use going at any faster gait than a trot here," said the young rough rider. "That will be enough to put ground behind us and to keep the horses warm. But they won't stand much more hard galloping, and I want to keep a little strength in them, in case I should need it for an additional burst of speed later on."

Whipple's teeth were chattering.

He cast an admiring glance at the young rough rider.

"I've heard of you often," he said, "and I used to think that all the yarns they told about you were dressed up a good deal. But I believe them now. You beat anyone I ever saw. I'd never have got away from those fellows if it hadn't been for you."

"You'd never have been in the fight with them if you hadn't backed me up when they tried to jump on me."

"Wouldn't I? It was you who saved me from being skinned out of all my money. But I never expected you to get out of that town alive, the way they went for you. Tell me, is that a habit of theirs in the West?"

"No. Those fellows were on the lookout for me when I got there. My playing with them only gave them an excuse to begin. I should have been more on my guard. I would not have played at all, only for the fact that they were getting money away from you without giving you the faintest chance."

"I was full," said Whipple. "I'm sober now, all right. I'll have an experience to tell about when I go back home."

"You won't have anything to tell at all if you run into more crowds like that. Dead men don't talk, you know, and that's what you'll be if you don't be more careful."

Whipple colored to the eyes.

"I suppose you mean my drinking," he said.

"Yes, that's what I mean," said the young rough rider. "If I didn't think that you were a fellow worth saving, I wouldn't bother telling you. But it is a good plan to let red liquor alone out here. It's bad enough anywhere, but out here it gets people into all sorts of trouble."

"I thought all these Westerners were heavy drinkers."

"That's where you made a mistake. You may meet a lot of people in barrooms in the East who drink and who claim to be good shots and all that, but you'll find

that the real thing in a wild Westerner fights shy of drink of any kind."

"Don't you ever drink?"

"No; and any man who needs his nerve and is wise, follows the same plan. If you are running into danger, the cooler you are and the clearer your mind, the better chance you have. A man who doesn't drink has a steadier nerve and a clearer head than the man who does."

"I guess that is right," said Whipple. "I swear off from this day. But where are we going?"

"I'm not altogether decided as yet. First I want to ask you a few questions about Simson."

"Fire away. I'll tell you anything I know."

"In the first place, how long have you been staying there?"

"About a week. I stopped at the hotel part of the time and I stopped at Rainsford's ranch for a while."

"Good. You ought to know something about affairs there. I am confident that Tom Dunton—Tornado Tom, as he calls himself—was expecting me there. You may be able to clear up some things that have been puzzling me. Is he, as he claims to be, the foreman for Rainsford?"

"Yes, he is."

"What kind of a man do you think Rainsford is?"

"Do you know him?" asked Whipple, with a sharp glance at the young rough rider.

"No."

"Well, then, I'll be frank with you. I think he's a crook. I don't know why I think that."

"No reason for supposing it?"

"No; he has been always very nice to me. He met me at the hotel and invited me out to the ranch. He's a big, stout man. He has a fine house out there and a large herd."

"So I have heard."

"And he did everything he could to make it comfortable, but, somehow, I could not help feeling that there was something queer about the man."

"Do you know Meyers—the man I came to see?"

"I saw him once in Simson. He and Rainsford are at daggers drawn."

"Their ranges adjoin, do they not?"

"Yes; there was some talk about cattle that Meyer claimed—I could not understand it."

"Humph!" said the young rough rider. "That explains why Meyers wanted me out there so soon, I think. But to go on, who is that girl who saved us from the gang?"

"I expected that you would have asked about her before," said Whipple. "If I had been in your place, I think that I would have asked about her the first thing. She's a pretty girl, if ever there was one, and she saved you from a lot of trouble, but she didn't seem to have much effect on you."

"Perhaps she had more effect than you think?" laughed Ted. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Bessie Vernon. She lives out at the Double X Ranch."

"Rainsford's?"

"Yes; she's Rainsford's niece, although I must confess that I don't see much family resemblance, either in character or appearance. She's a nice girl, but there is a mystery about her."

"I guess a little mystery about a girl always makes her the more attractive."

"Perhaps it does. But Bessie would be attractive enough without the mystery. She's a little wild in her ways."

"How do you mean?"

"Well; in some ways she is more like a boy than a girl. She will go off and ride horseback all day in that hunting suit of hers. She's as good a rider as ever I saw, and when it comes to shooting, I don't think that there is a man out on the Double X Ranch that can equal her."

"Those fellows at the hotel—were they cowboys on the ranch?"

"A good many of them are; the rest are hangers-on that Rainsford keeps about there for no purpose, that I can see. He practically owns the town, and this gang of his do what they please about the place. I was sick of them—they are a rough crowd. I would have left long ago, if—if—— "

"If it wasn't for Bessie Vernon."

"Well, I suppose that that has something to do with it. But a lot of good it will do me. Sometimes she is as nice as you please to me, and other times I can't understand her at all. And to-day she didn't pay the least bit of attention to me. It was you she was looking out for."

"She seemed to know me. She called me by name."

"I heard her. That puzzled me a good deal. It seems to me that a day or so ago I heard Rainsford saying something to Tornado Tom about you."

"You did? Do you remember what it was?"

"I didn't catch it. They didn't know I was there, and when they saw me, they shut right up like clams."

"You haven't seen Meyers lately?"

"No."

The two rode ahead for some time in silence.

The young rough rider appeared to be plunged in thought, but he kept a sharp lookout on both sides of a natural trail that they were following.

It ran higher and higher up among the hills, and presently passed through a clump of timber.

Whipple followed Ted. with his teeth chattering.

He had no idea where the young rough rider was leading him, or what he planned to do, but he had confidence

in Ted and felt that he was capable of meeting any emergency.

"Well, we have to camp out somewhere up here for the night," said the young rough rider. "Then to-morrow we can start on a detour for some railroad point. You don't want to go back to Simson, do you?"

"No; but I'd like——" Whipple hesitated.

"To see Bessie Vernon again," smiled the young rough rider.

"I suppose that I might as well admit it. But I'm not going back to Simson. Not if I can help it."

"Then we will camp somewhere up in the hills to-night and move on again in the morning."

"But those fellows—you said that they would follow our tracks."

"I think that they will. That's what we will have to look out for. We want to get a camp in such a place that they cannot come upon us without our getting a look at them first. We ought to be able to find some point of rock along the trail where we can ambush them if we want to."

"But our horses?"

"It will be an easy enough matter to hide them."

"I suppose that there will be no supper for us to-night," said Whipple, with a shiver.

"I guess there will be a supper. I haven't got anything to eat in my saddlebags, but I have the means of getting it. There is a fishing line and hooks in them, and there's plenty of fine trout in the streams up here as well as game."

"Raw trout is pretty tough food."

"We won't have to eat it raw. I have matches in a water-tight box."

"You seem to have about everything that you need with you."

"I have a few things that I found it always wise to carry when I was on the trail. But it's getting late, now. The sun is setting behind the hills over there. I think we can move ahead a little faster, now."

They were riding along a mountain road, with pinnacles of rock and cliffs rising up on one side of them.

Straight ahead, over the mountains, was the crimson sunset.

It would be dark very soon.

While the boys had been talking, the horses had dropped down to a walk, but they trotted forward again with very little urging.

At a brisk pace they went higher and higher up the trail.

Not far away, on one side, could be heard the pleasant murmur of a mountain stream, and occasionally it gleamed in sight when the trail wound close enough to it.

Presently the young rough rider pulled up his horse and pointed to a tall rock on one side of the trail.

"There is the place for our camp," he said. "We can put up our horses on the other side of it, and climb up on that side. It cannot be ascended from the trail, and anyone on the top of it could pick off people coming up the trail without the slightest trouble. We'll hide the horses in here where there is something that they can graze on."

In a few moments the horses were picketed out in a grassy glade among the trees.

The saddles were taken off and the saddle blankets spread out over them.

Then the two boys started to ascend the rock.

From the side of the trail it rose perpendicularly into the air for a height of nearly twenty feet.

But on the other side, from the woods which fringed the trail, the slope was more gradual.

Ted led the way, climbing from point to point on the rock.

It was steep, and yet the ascent was a surprisingly easy one.

It seemed as if some one had been there before and made a path for them.

At length they reached the top and stood on the very summit of the rock.

It was of considerable extent; there was a carpet of moss and grass over it, and at the edges there were clumps of bushes.

But it was none of these things that the young rough rider was thinking of at the present moment.

Some one else had been there before them, and had camped there.

A fire was still burning on one side of the rock where its smoke was carried off among the bushes into the trees, so that it could not be seen from the pass below.

There were two or three bearskins piled on one side of the fire, and on the other was a pile of cut wood.

Not far away there were cooking utensils, a tin pannikin full of water, a griddle for frying and a kettle as well as some tin plates and cups.

And what filled Ted and his companion with more delight than any of these things, was the half of a carcass of a deer, which had been hung over two forked sticks.

Beside the deer was a bag of flour and a small box of salt.

The two boys stared at each other in wonderment and delight.

These were the things that they wanted above all others, and it seemed as if they had been sent down from heaven at their wish and for their especial behoof and benefit.

They were cold, there was a fire; they were hungry, there were fine venison steaks; they were thirsty, there was water; they were tired, there was a couch of soft bearskins that a king might have envied.

Both boys stepped forward and warmed their hands in the blaze.

"Who do you suppose left this camp here?" said Whipple.

"Some one on a hunting trip, in all probability," said the young rough rider. "If so, they can have no objections to our eating some of their venison and warming ourselves at their fire."

"My teeth are watering for that venison," said Whipple.

"So are mine," said the young rough rider. "So we'll get to work and cook supper. At the same time we must keep a sharp lookout along the trail."

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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE OWNER APPEARS.

It was night.

Above, in the skies, twinkled the stars.

There was no moon, and a soft night wind was sighing among the trees.

The two boys who were lying wrapped up in the bearskins on the top of the huge rock were enjoying that comfort that only comes to those who live in the open air and have perfect health.

The young rough rider had cooked a supper of venison steaks and flapjacks.

He had found coffee and molasses among the stores on top of the rock.

The molasses had been used to sweeten the coffee, as well as on the flapjacks, and the whole thing had made a delightful meal.

When Whipple licked his lips and said that he had had enough, the tin plates were swept as clean as though they had been washed, and there was not a drop of coffee left.

Then the young rough rider had washed the things and put them back in their places with that neatness and dispatch which is characteristic of those who have had a training in the United States Army.

More wood had been put on the fire, and its kindly blaze had dried the wet garments of the young rough rider and his companion.

Now the fire had burned down to a dull glow.

The two boys had rolled themselves in the bearskins and lying near the edge of the rock, looked down over the country that lay beneath them.

It was dark, of course, but still they could see the trail, and a dim outline of wood and mountain.

Certainly no one could have come up in the center of the trail, where the shadows were not so deep, without attracting the notice of the boys.

But it was a body of horsemen that the boys were on their guard against.

They knew that the sound of hoofs on the rocky trail would apprise them instantly of their coming.

Ted and Whipple lay there talking for a long time, looking up at the stars.

Whipple told of adventures and pranks at college; the young rough rider of his experiences while serving under Roosevelt in Cuba, and, later on, in another volunteer regiment, under Fred Funston, the gallant Nebraskan, in the Philippines.

Then he related his first coming to the West, his fight for the possession of the Black Mountain Ranch, in Dakota, which he had inherited, and how he had come to form the organization of boys that had afterward won fame through all the West as the young rough riders.

He told of his long-continued fight with cattle rustlers in Dakota, and of his Mexican adventures later on.

To all this, Whipple listened with the greatest delight.

He had heard of Ted Strong often, but the thought that he was actually on the trail with him and talking to him seemed too good to be true.

Then, finally, the young rough rider became silent, and lay in his bearskins, listening to the voices of the night.

And you who have lain outdoors through the long watches and listened to them, know that they are many and beautiful.

There is the sad sighing of the wind that seems to play on the pine trees as if they were the strings of a great Æolian harp, now swelling loud into wailing music, now sinking to the softest whisper.

Then there is the screech of the owl from the depths of the forest, the distant bay of a wolf, the sudden scream of a mountain lion.

"What's that?" said Whipple, starting as he heard it.

"It's a catamount," said Ted. "But we are safe from them here."

"They are terrible animals. I saw one that had been shot down at the Double X Ranch. That girl, Bessie Vernon, shot it."

"She must have her nerve with her for a girl. But then she showed plenty of it to-day."

"She's got plenty of it, all right. Too much, some people would say."

"Listen!"

The young rough rider rolled over in the bearskins and spoke in a soft voice.

He had heard something unusual.

It was a sound not made by any animal that he had ever seen or heard.

The two boys lay in silence on the top of the rock.

Whipple could hear nothing and see nothing.

His companion suddenly straightened up, went on one knee and peered into the darkness.

"Who's there?" he said.

There was no answer.

Ted's revolver glittered in the glow of the fire.

It clicked.

"I can make out your figure," he said. "I have you covered. Speak! I won't hurt you."

There was silence for a moment longer.

"Whipple," said Ted, in a low tone, "perhaps this is some one who has a right here. Perhaps not. But we can take no chances. I can see the dark figure, but I can't make it out very well. Throw a piece of wood on the fire."

Whipple tossed on a log, and the fire blazed up.

At the same moment a voice sounded out of the shadows.

"Mr. Strong," it said; "don't you think that you have done enough in appropriating my camp, without threatening me with a revolver, too?"

There was a certain mockery in the tones, and it was the voice of a boy rather than a man.

Although the blaze went higher, the figure slipped still further back.

It seemed to be a shadow that fled noiselessly before the light.

"Just remember, Mr. Rough Rider," continued the voice, "that I have you covered, too. You are in the light."

A rifle clicked in the darkness.

Ted Strong had seen too much border fighting to disregard that sign.

He fell flat on his face and sighted his weapon at the figure.

A burst of silvery laughter came out of the darkness.

"So long for the present," said the voice. "I'm off! You can't catch me!"

But the young rough rider could not be eluded so easily as all that.

He had been sliding forward on his face.

Now he leaped out into the darkness.

He was just in time to catch the figure in his arms.

It was a soft, yielding figure; not the figure of a man or a boy, even.

Ted could feel strands of soft, long hair brushed across his face.

It was the hair of a woman.

The figure struggled a little, and then lay back in the arms of the young rough rider.

"Let me go, please," it pleaded, trying to draw away.

"After I see you," said Ted, detaining the girl, for he knew by this time that it was a girl.

"Please let me go. I gave you my fire, and my supper, and my camp. Is this the way you thank me?"

"I'll thank you properly if I catch a glimpse of you and see who you are."

"I thought you were a gentleman, Ted Strong. I did not think that you would use force with a girl."

The tone in which this was said showed that it was meant a great deal more in jest than in earnest.

Ted answered in the same vein.

"I don't know that you are a girl."

"Doesn't that feel like a girl's hand squeezing yours?"

It certainly did, soft, and warm, and small.

The young rough rider returned the pressure without knowing that he did so.

"Oh, dear!" laughed his prisoner, "you are flirting with a girl you haven't even seen."

"Well, I will see you," said Ted, whose curiosity was at fever pitch by this time. "Come nearer to the fire."

The girl went with him.

When she was near enough, so that the blaze shone on her face and form, Whipple, who had remained near the fire while Ted had gone in pursuit of her, uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Bessie Vernon!" he cried. "I didn't believe it possible, although I thought I knew the voice!"

"The girl that saved my life!" said the young rough rider.

"And whom you repaid by threatening to shoot, and hauling her around after you had eaten her supper," said Miss Vernon, arranging her hair and looking archly at the young rough rider.

In the fleeting glimpse that the young rough rider had had of this girl in the afternoon, he had thought her pretty.

Now she seemed prettier than before.

Her teeth flashed like so many pearls in the firelight, her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed and rosy.

She was dressed in the same fringed hunting suit that she had worn that afternoon, and she carried a little rifle in one hand.

"Is this your camp?" asked Ted.

"Yes, it's mine—or was, till you took possession."

"How did you get that deer up here?"

"I've got an Indian friend in the woods who helps me."

"And this is where you go when you disappear all by yourself from the ranch house?" said Whipple.

"This is the place. Now that people have found it out, it's no more use to me."

"I'll never tell," said Ted.

"Nor I," said Whipple.

"But your knowing spoils it."

"Sit down, and let us cook you something?" said Ted.

"No, I won't do that. I came up here hoping that you were here. I thought that I could see and go away."

"You looked too long."

"I listened. I heard all that you were telling about your adventures. Really, it was interesting—so interesting that I stayed instead of going away, as I meant to. Then you saw me. I didn't think that your eyes were so sharp. You are like an Indian."

"I have trailed with Indians, and learned some of their ways. I see that you have, also," said the young rough rider. "But let me thank you for what you did this afternoon."

"And let me thank you, too," said Whipple.

"All right, you've done it now. You were in danger there. Those men work on my father's ranch. They are

a rough crowd. I knew that they would pursue you, and I said to myself that if the young rough rider was as clever as they said he was, he would camp for the night on the top of my rock where I have my camp. I came to see."

"Not by the trail?"

"Not by the trail—no, that would have taken too long. I have a short cut through the timber that leads me out to the ranch house. Good-night!"

"But stop!" cried Ted, running after her, for she had darted away, "let us see you home."

The girl came to a standstill.

"You wanted to thank me for what I did?" she said.

"Yes."

"Will you do me a favor in return for it?"

"Certainly."

"Then please don't follow me or try to find out where I go. You can leave here to-morrow in safety. Take the west trail for a mile. Then turn to the right. That trail will lead you to Tremaine City. Please don't follow me! Promise!"

Ted could see that the girl was serious now.

All the gayety had gone out of her face, and her eyes had almost a tragic look.

She was a puzzling girl, but she was a fascinating one.

"I promise," said the young rough rider.

"Do you promise?" she asked, turning to Whipple.

"Yes," said Whipple; "but——"

"Never mind any more buts. I want you both to promise me that you will not tell anything to anyone about this place for a week."

"We are willing to promise anything you please," said the young rough rider.

The girl looked at him gratefully.

"Thank you," she said. "I advise you both to go away from here as soon as you can. It is a dangerous place—a dangerous place for the young rough rider especially."

"I found it pretty dangerous this afternoon, I must admit," said Ted, "but——"

"No more," said the girl. "You have heard what I said. Good-by."

She had gone before they knew it.

She was as light of foot as a fawn, and the shadows swallowed her up.

"We promised not to follow," said the young rough rider. "And we won't. But I would give a good deal to go after her. There is a mystery connected with that girl."

"I told you that there was something puzzling about her," said Whipple, "but in the morning we start up the trail, and I suppose that we may never see her again."

"Are you going East soon?"

"Any time I please."

"Do you want to see her again?"

"Do I want to see her? Was I hungry when I came up here? Was I wet when I was in the river?"

There was no doubt but that Whipple was smitten with this girl.

His manner as well as his words showed it.

"All right," said the young rough rider. "I am coming back to Simson in a few days. If you want excitement, come with me."

"You bet I will, if you will let me."

"I'll let you. I am coming back there to clean out that whole town. I am convinced that there has been a lot of crooked work there. I am sure that something has happened to Meyers, and I am going to find out all about it. When I come back, Simson will get the biggest surprise it ever had."

The face of the young rough rider had grown suddenly stern, and Whipple could see that he was in deadly earnest.

He spoke no more, and the two lay down, and were presently lost in sleep.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE DISCOVERY OF MEYERS.

At earliest daybreak the two boys, who had spent the night on the top of the rock, were up and about.

They had been able to sleep all through the night without keeping any sort of a watch.

Bessie Vernon had told them that they had eluded the party from Simson that had set out after them.

So there was no need for them to be on their guard.

On the top of that rock they were perfectly safe from all manner of wild beasts.

No animal would be likely to attempt to scale that crag.

They had both been tired out with the riding that they had done that day, but before the sun was up, the young rough rider had fanned the embers of the fire, which he had banked overnight, into a blaze, and had put a pot of coffee on to boil.

Then he had turned to Whipple and shook him till he was awake.

It took the Eastern boy a great deal longer to bestir himself and get wide awake than it did the young rough rider.

Ted was used to life in the open, and could sleep like a cat, with one eye open, as it were.

There was a basin which they used to wash in.

Then they sat down to a breakfast of venison and coffee, with a few biscuits, which Ted had made and baked over the fire on a griddle.

By the time they were through with their morning meal it was broad daylight.

They left everything in the little rock camp just as they had found it, except for the food that they had eaten.

Ted had cooked a few slices of venison, as well as a few extra biscuits, which he packed in one of his saddle-bags.

He knew that they would be in the saddle all day.

Unless they took supplies with them now, there would be little chance of their getting a midday meal.

Then they clambered down the rock and went to their horses.

They found the animals fresh and frisky after a good night's rest and plenty of grass to graze on.

They were apparently none the worse for their wetting of the day before or the hard riding that had preceded and followed it.

After watering the animals at a mountain stream that flowed close by the trail, they saddled up and bridled them.

Filling their canteens with the cold water and taking each a long draught, they climbed into their saddles and were ready for the day's journey.

The birds were twittering in all the tree tops, and the valleys were shrouded in the blue mist of morning as they rode off up the winding trail, taking a farewell look at the great rock with the camp on the top of it, where they had spent the night.

If the reader has ever been astride of a good steed, riding off through the gray morning, with the birds caroling overhead and the fresh gale blowing in his face. he can form some idea of the exhilaration and blitheness of spirits that these two boys felt as they cantered off down the trail.

The horses were mettlesome and frisky, they had to be held in rather than spurred.

Everything seemed to conspire to make their ride a delightful one.

Whipple was a little sore and stiff from the hard riding and the wetting of the day before.

He was not inured to a life in the open in the saddle like the young rough rider, but as he rode forward and grew warmer, the stiffness left him entirely, and he was able to enjoy the ride to the full.

"What are you looking at so closely down in the road?" he asked, noticing that the young rough rider had his eyes fixed on the trail in front of him.

"I see tracks there," said Ted. "Four or five horsemen have passed this way."

"I can't see a thing," said Whipple.

The young rough rider made the Eastern boy ride close beside him, and showed him how he followed a trail.

Here there were a few broken twigs that showed the print of a horseshoe.

Here the grass was trampled down in the same way.

Here there was a scrape in the hard soil that no animal but an iron-shod horse would have been likely to have made.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Whipple, as these things were explained to him. "Wonderful! I often heard of this sort of thing, but I never thought that it could be worked out to an exact science like this."

"It can. The Indians have the science of trailing perfected to a wonderful degree. They know more about it, really, than the white men do, although some of the old scouts and trappers are very keen on a trail. A scout can read the country as you would read a book."

"I see! I can catch the idea now."

"That trail ahead of us is plain enough," said Ted, pointing to a strip of softer clay, where the marks of horseshoes was plainly visible.

"I can see it well enough," said Whipple, "but it is all confused, so that it is hard to tell what it is."

"You see that some of the marks are smaller than others and some are made over the others. That indicates the number of horses, if you study it closely enough."

"You say that this is the trail of four horses?"

"Yes; four horses. One of them was either a trifle lame or had a defect in its gait. Another was either ridden by a very heavy man or carried a double load. You see that some of the hoof marks are much deeper than others."

"I see that. I suppose those fellows must have passed last night."

"This trail was not made last night. It is older than that."

"How old."

"It is at least two days old."

"I don't see how you can tell that."

"It is simple enough."

The young rough rider brought his horse to a standstill and leaped to the ground.

He bent and touched the soil with his hands.

"As I thought," he said. "It is very hard. Look back along the way we have come."

Whipple turned in his saddle and looked back.

"Can you see our trail?" asked the young rough rider.

"No, we don't seem to have left any."

"We have, but it is so slight that it is scarcely visible. It is nothing like this. Look at those hoof marks. You see they must have been left here when the soil was wet."

"Yes, I can see that, now, although I never thought of it before."

"It has not rained here for two days, therefore these tracks are two days old, and they are not much more than two days old, either, for there was a rainstorm at about that time that would have wiped out all previous tracks."

"These tracks were made either during the storm or while the clay was still wet."

"That's it. Now that period, about two days ago, is the time that you saw Meyers last, is it not?"

Whipple scratched his head.

"I remember seeing him in Simson," he said. "Tornado Tom pointed him out to me as a fellow who had a ranch next to Rainsford's."

"And that was—when?"

"Just two days ago—and now that I remember it, there was a heavy storm that morning. It is the only rain that I ever remember seeing here, and it did come down in torrents."

"You saw Meyers in Simson that day. That is the day on which he sent a dispatch to me to come at once. He did not tell me the reason, but I suspect that he felt that there was some danger of his herd being stolen."

"Do you think that anything has happened to Meyers?"

"I don't know. He should have been in Simson yesterday, as he promised. I don't know why, but in my mind I connect this in some way with Meyers' disappearance."

"What's that on the side of the road?"

The thing which Whipple pointed to was something yellow in a bush at one side of the trail.

It was too vivid a yellow for any leaf or flower that would be growing there.

The young rough rider guided his horse in that direction and snatched it up from the bush without leaving the saddle.

He held it to the light and looked at it with a very grave face.

"My feeling about that was right," he said. "Meyer has been here. He has been brought here against his will."

"What is it?"

The young rough rider showed Whipple a piece of yellow paper that he held in his hand.

It was dusty, and stained, and torn, but there was no doubt what it was.

It was a telegram—one of those familiar yellow pieces of paper that we have all received and that are just the same, whether you get them in New York or London, or in the smallest and wildest frontier town in the country.

"You see, it is addressed to George Meyers," said the young rough rider. "It is the telegram that I sent him telling that I would come here at once. I addressed it to the telegraph office at Simson two days ago."

"And it was coming out of the telegraph office that I saw Meyers last."

"He had just received this, then."

"And now it turns up here, twenty miles away."

"In a place diametrically opposite in direction from the Meyers ranch. This was not a place that Meyers would be likely to visit. He would either stay in Simson or on his ranch."

"And what was he doing here?"

"That's what I am going to find out. He was with these horsemen who rode along here. I have no doubt about that. Luckily the trail is unusually easy to follow from this on. I am going to follow it. Are you with me?"

"Sure!"

"All right! Forward!"

The young rough rider rode a little in advance, now with his eyes glued to the trail ahead of him.

The tracks left by the horsemen who had ridden here two days before were so plain that Whipple could have followed them by himself.

They ran along the main trail for a while, and then turned to one side.

"When the fellows rode back from here, as they did," said Ted, "the ground was dry, and they did not leave much of a track."

"Do you know that they did go back?"

"There are certain indications that would lead me to believe that. Here! up this way!"

The trail seemed to lead straight into a thick wood that grew on the mountain side.

Then it turned to the right.

And then the young rough rider reined up his horse.

Just in front of him there was a steep face of rock, and in it there was a dark cave.

The young rough rider stood peering into the cave for a moment.

Then he slipped out of the saddle and went inside, leaving his horse standing in the trail.

Whipple, after a moment's hesitation, followed suit.

He entered the cave, to find that it was so dark that he could not see.

For a moment he stood there blinking, trying to accustom his eyes to the gloom.

Then he began to see objects about him.

He was in a large, roomy cave, dry and with a few scattered tin cans and fragments of paper on the floor to show that human beings had been there.

But there was more than this.

In one corner of the place there was a pile of skins.

Crouching on this pile of skins, tied to a post that was driven into the floor behind him, there was a man.

He was unshaven and unshorn, pale and with a bandage around his head.

The young rough rider hailed him with an exclamation of surprise.

It was George Meyers, the man who had been the cause of his coming to that part of the country.

At first Meyers did not recognize the young rough rider, but when he did, he uttered a cry of delight.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MEYERS' STORY.

It did not take the young rough rider long to set Meyers free from the lariats which bound him to the post in the cave.

At first the ranchman seemed rather dazed and puzzled at the sudden appearance of the two boys.

He stared at the young rough rider as though he was not sure whether it was the boy himself or his ghost.

When introduced to Launce Whipple, he took his hand in an absent-minded sort of a way, and nodded his head several times before saying anything.

"How about that cut in your head?" asked the young rough rider, first of all. "Is it serious, do you know?"

"No, it is only a scalp wound. It is not that that I care about. By this time all the cattle that I had planned to sell to you are off the ranch and rebranded."

"By whom?"

"That scoundrel, Rainsford. He is nothing but a cattle rustler masquerading in the guise of an honest ranchman. All the people in the town of Simson are in his pay. He is the biggest outlaw in the State."

"That's what I always thought!" said Whipple. "I thought that there was something queer about that fellow.'

"I saw you with him the other day, young man," said Meyers, slowly. "Let me tell you that he is pretty bad company. He has ruined me. But how do you fellows come here?"

"Never mind that. How long have you been here?" said the young rough rider.

"Two days. I was taken away here after I received your telegram."

"And you left it lying on the road."

"I dropped it. I thought that it might be a clew to some one. I had little hopes, though, of having anyone track me out here."

"Have they fed you?" asked Whipple.

"Yes, I have food and water. But how did you fellows trace me here?"

"Never mind that for the present," said Ted. "Tell us your story first."

"Well," said Meyers, slowly, "I'll begin at the beginning. You remember that I wired you to come here at once, that I had a herd for sale in a hurry."

"Yes; I thought that there was something wrong from your telegram."

"There was something wrong. My range adjoins that of this man, Rainsford. I was missing a lot of cattle. I finally traced the theft to Rainsford, and then I discovered that he made a regular business of that sort of thing. He had hired my own men to work against me. I had intended to sell some of the cattle to the young rough rider, so I telegraphed you at once. I knew that you had a reputation for running down cattle thieves. That fellow, Tom Denton, was in the telegraph office when I got your message. He read it. The next thing I knew, he had set upon me after I left the office. I saw you with him a few minutes before the attack, young man."

"I was with him," said Whipple. "I didn't know anything about this attack, though. He told me to go in and have a drink at the hotel. I went in and had two or three. When I came out he was gone."

"He had set on me with three of his followers in the meantime. They knocked me over the head. He is mayor of the town, or something of the kind, so he does as he pleases. They took me out here, tied behind one of their horses, and left me here."

"You read the trail all right," said Whipple to the young rough rider. "That is just about the way you figured it out."

"Now you know my story," said Meyers. "I suppose that gang has looted my ranch of every head of cattle worth taking. Now, tell me how you came here."

In a few words the young rough rider told of his adventures in Simson, and how he had found the trail. Meyers listened to him with interest.

"This thing isn't over yet," said the young rough rider. "You know that I hold a certain interest in your ranch. I am going back to Simson and am going to clean out the whole town. But who fed you here? When he comes around with your dinner to-day I think it would be a good time to give him a surprise."

"I found the stuff here when I woke in the morning," said Meyers. "But I woke this morning earlier than yesterday. I never saw who it was that left the food here. There was enough stuff left here every morning to last me through the day."

"Then we are about in time this morning," said Ted. "All we have to do is to go in hiding in the cave here. And the sooner we do it the better. I'll get the horses out of the way."

The young rough rider always acts promptly when once his mind is made up. He darted out of the cave, and in a few moments had his horse and that of Whipple concealed in a clump of trees at one side of the cave.

Then he re-entered and disposed the rope around Meyers, so that he would appear to be tied up again.

"Now," he said, "lie back, and pretend that you are asleep. Whipple and myself will conceal ourselves in the dark corners."

As he spoke, there was the sound of a horse outside.

Meyers lay back at once, and Ted, motioning Whipple to one side of the cave, crouched down at the other side.

An instant later a figure darkened the entrance to the cave.

The young rough rider dashed forward and caught it in his arms.

There was the clatter of tin dishes on the floor, and a shrill scream.

Then the young rough rider felt the weight of a fainting figure in his arms.

"Bessie Vernon!" he exclaimed, as he looked into the face of the figure.

The other two sprang to their feet and ran to his side.

It was indeed Bessie Vernon.

She lay back in his arms as pale as death.

She was fainting, but before they could do anything to restore her, she gasped; opened her eyes and stood up.

She stared at the two boys, and at the disheveled figure of Meyers,

Her face was still pale with affright, but as she looked at the two boys, an expression of the bitterest contempt and anger filled her eyes.

She stood upright and looked at them disdainfully.

The plates, filled with food that she had been bearing, lay unnoticed at her feet.

"You promised me!" she said, slowly, "after I had saved your lives! After I had seen you safe in my own camp, that no one else ever entered before! After I had helped you to escape from my uncle, knowing that you would try to run him down later on! You promised me that you would not follow me. And this is the way that you kept your promise!"

"We did——" stammered Whipple, his face the picture of concern, but the indignant girl would not listen to him.

"I have been used to seeing no one who was good or honest," she said, in scathing tones. "I knew that my uncle was a cattle thief. I knew that those under him were brutes—men who would hesitate at no crime when he commanded it. But I had read in books, I had heard that there was such a thing as goodness and honesty, and I thought that it was true—like a fool."

"We meant to keep——" began Whipple again.

"Don't talk to me!" cried the girl. "I want no more lies. I thought that when you came there, you were like one of the men that I had read about. I thought that you were honest. I pitied you in the hands of Tornado Tom and the rest. I think Tom is better than you. He is not a hypocrite. And this other boy, this young rough rider! I thought that he was honest. He is supposed to be. He has the reputation. But the greatness of his reputation shows only the greatness of his hypocrisy. He is as bad as the others. It is terrible! They are all alike! I wish I was dead!"

The girl covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

Up to this point the young rough rider had been silent.

He knew that he would have to let the girl talk herself out before he could get her to listen to him.

Now he stepped close to her side and began to talk to her.

He told her the story of the trail and of how they had come to find Meyers.

He told her that neither Whipple nor himself had intended to break their promise.

Whipple added his protestations.

At first the girl paid no attention to them, but as her crying fit wore off, she listened, at first incredulously, and then doubtfully.

Then she looked up into the eyes of the young rough rider.

"I see that I have made a mistake," she said. "You are honest. I am not. I have been helping the cattle rustlers."

"You have been bringing food to this man?"

"Yes. I knew that he was here. I would not set him free. I knew that would mean ruin and jail for my uncle. But I could not bear to think of his starving."

"You have been doing this, unknown to your uncle?"

"Yes."

"He would have let me starve," said Meyers. "But this girl! Well, no matter what happens to Rainsford, I will look out for her."

"She'll not want for friends," said Whipple. "I have friends in the East who will be glad to take care of her."

"I don't know what to do!" said Bessie. "I ought to warn my uncle. I don't know what to do. He is the only friend I have. Since my mother died, ten years ago, I had to live with him."

"You know that he is a villain?" said the young rough rider. "You would rather not live with him if you could help it?"

"But what am I to do? He has all my money."

"We kept our promise in not following you," said Ted. "But now that we have found you again, I think that it would be better for you to come with us."

"I don't know what to do. I've tried to do what is right. Is it right to desert your uncle?"

"That old thief!" growled Meyers, in an undertone. "He robbed you, as he has been trying to rob everyone else."

Ted looked at the girl.

Then he glanced at Whipple and smiled.

"Perhaps you can explain things to her so that she will see it differently, he said to the Eastern boy. "Meyers, I think that you need a little fresh air and sunlight, after being cooped in here all this time."

"I do," said Meyers.

"Then we'll walk outside for a few minutes."

Ted Strong knew that the girl had conceived a great liking for Whipple, and he thought that if anyone could persuade her to leave her uncle, it would be the young college man.

He thought that it would be a good idea to leave them alone together for a little while.

Meyers and the young rough rider passed out of the cave under the trees outside.

"I don't know what is happening down at my place," muttered Meyers. "I suppose that he will have all the cattle on it corralled."

"It doesn't matter. We will get a sufficient force together and take him in hand. We have evidence enough to send him to jail now. We have him dead to rights. But, look! There is some one coming up here on horseback."

The two peered down through the trees.

A mounted figure could be seen approaching through the trees.

It was alone.

Meyers looked at it with a darkening face.

"It's that scoundrel, Rainsford," he muttered.

"He's coming up to see you," said Ted. "He thinks you are tied up in the cave. Hide behind those bushes, there, and we'll get him."

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## CHAPTER X.

### RAINSFORD MEETS WITH A SURPRISE.

Meyers lost no time in getting under cover.

There were plenty of mesquite bushes growing close to the entrance to the cave, so that there was no difficulty in doing this.

Rainsford was still a good distance off, and he could not see up through the trees.

There was no doubt but that they would take him unawares.

Meyers would not have thought of this plan himself, but once the quick brain of the young rough rider had suggested it, he saw what a good idea it was.

While he concealed himself on one side of the entrance, Ted dropped behind the shelter of a bush on the other.

Before going into cover he spoke a few words to Meyers.

"We want to take this man alive," he said. "And we must not handle him roughly."

"I'd like to kill the villain," said the ranchman. "He deserves rough handling."

"He may deserve it, but we can't give it to him here. Remember that his niece is in the cave there. No matter how great a villain he is or how badly he has treated her in taking the money that had been left her, she has some natural affection for him. She would not be any good if she had not."

"The girl's all right. But the uncle is an old crook."

"That may be. But we have to consider the feelings of the girl. She saved you from hunger and thirst. Remember that."

"I remember it. I'll not hurt him."

The young rough rider slipped into the shadows, and a moment later Rainsford appeared riding slowly up to the entrance to the cave.

He was a heavily built man, with a scar on his forehead and a grizzled beard.

He was just dropping out of the saddle, when Meyers leaped out at him.

But before Meyers could reach him he was a prisoner.

A lariat curled out of the clump of bushes where the young rough rider was concealed.

The wide noose fell silently over the head of the cattle rustler.

It tightened with a sudden jerk.

As Meyers reached his side, he was lifted out of the saddle and thrown on the ground with his arms pinioned to his side.

"Tie him," said Ted, stepping out.

Meyers was not slow to act.

The cattle rustler had uttered no cry when he had been jerked out of the saddle.

He had been partially stunned by his fall, and before he could stir, the young rough rider and Meyers had flung themselves upon him and bound him hand and foot.

The whole thing had taken place so noiselessly that the two, who were talking earnestly together in the cave, had not the faintest idea of what was taking place.

"Lift his feet," said Ted, in a low voice. "We'll drop him into these bushes here for the present."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Miss Vernon must not know at present that her uncle is a prisoner. I don't want to shock her feelings unnecessarily. I'll gag him and hide him here, and the three of you can ride off. I'll remain here and have a talk with Rainsford."

"I'd like to stay and talk with him myself."

"If you do as I say," said the young rough rider, "you'll get all your cattle back. I'll give you a note to a friend of mine in Tremaine City. He'll get together men for you. To-morrow I'll come out, and then we'll start back for Simson. In the meantime I will learn from Rainsford what he has done with your cattle."

"He'll never tell you."

"I'm going to see, anyway. Here! Take his feet, quick! before the girl sees him."

Already the young rough rider had gagged the cattle rustler with his own handkerchief.

Now he was lifted and deposited behind a clump of bushes.

Ted took charge of his horse, tethering it a little distance away.

A moment later Whipple appeared at the door of the cave.

His face was radiant with smiles.

"Miss Vernon has consented to go East with me," he said.

"With you?"

"Yes, as Mrs. Whipple."

The young rough rider congratulated Whipple and Bessie.

Meyers followed suit.

"Now," said Ted, "the sooner you people start for Tremaine City, the better. I am going to stay here to do some scouting. Meyers will go with you. He is getting together some men for me."

"I'm all ready to start," said Whipple.

Bessie Vernon was glad enough to go herself.

She was tired.

She did not want to go back to the Double X Ranch.

She had no place else to go and she knew that her uncle would be in a furious rage when he discovered that Meyers had escaped.

Accordingly, a few minutes later, Meyers, Whipple and the girl bade good-by to the young rough rider, and rode off down the trail.

Ted waited until they were out of sight.

Then he stepped over to the bush where Rainsford had been hidden.

It has been said that the cattle rustler was bound and gagged, but it must also be remembered that his ears were not tied up in any way.

He could hear with the greatest distinctness all that was going on, although he could not make a sound to attract the attentibn of his niece.

He was fairly purple with rage when the young rough rider dragged him out of the bush.

Ted hauled him by the shoulders into the cave, and tied him to the post at which he himself had tied his victim, Meyers, only two days before, little dreaming at the time that he himself was to occupy the same position so soon.

The young rough rider loosened the handkerchief that had been used as a gag, and took it off.

The handkerchief had been forced in between Rainsford's open jaws and tied tight there.

It was a moment before he could utter a sound.

His mouth was dry and stiff with the effect of the gag.

But when the sound did come, it was one that would have been heard a pretty good distance off.

It was an inarticulate roar of rage.

And after that roar there came a stream of oaths and curses such as the boy had never had the misfortune to listen to.

Rainsford was a man with a hot temper, and no one had ever dared before to administer to him the treatment that he had received this day.

Ted stood this for a moment or so.

"Here, that's enough of that," he said, sternly. "Quiet down there, or I'll bat you over the head with this gun."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Did you ever hear of the young rough rider?"

"What do you mean by keeping me tied up here?"

"A little fun I'm having."

"You'll pay for your fun."

"Perhaps."

"What do you mean by the attack that you and those other scoundrels made on me? What do you mean by running off with my niece? Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, I know you, Rainsford."

"How dare you treat me this way? Do you know what I am?"

"Yes, I know what you are. And I think that this bluff of yours has gone on about long enough. I know who you are and what you are. I know that you are Rainsford, the rancher; Rainsford, the czar of the town of Simson; Rainsford, the cattle king; Rainsford, the robber; Rainsford, the cattle rustler; Rainsford, the man who would be lynched by any body of respectable cattle men if they had their hands on him; Rainsford, the robber of his niece, who stole her legacy from her; Rainsford, the murderer who hires thugs like Tornado Tom to do the dirty work that he is afraid to do himself! I could tell you more. Shall I go on?"

Rainsford had listened to this speech of the young rough rider with a paling face.

Ted was guessing a good deal in some of the things he said, but he guessed shrewdly, and he struck the nail on the head every time.

Already he had sized up the character of the man before him, and knew just what such a man would be likely to do under all circumstances.

To Rainsford, as he sat there bound to the post, it seemed that the boy was aware of every crime that he had ever committed.

The eyes of the young rough rider seemed to read his very soul. He felt that he had not a secret from this boy who was holding him a prisoner.

"For Heaven's sake, stop!" he cried. "Say no more! How do you know all this? Who told you this?"

"Never mind who told me, Rainsford! Your crimes have found you out!"

The young rough rider said this in a deep, sonorous voice, that echoed through the dark recesses of the cave.

Rainsford shuddered.

He tried to rise to his feet, and realized that he was bound fast to the post.

His courage was fast oozing away.

He was a man who could be daring enough when things were going his way, but now all his nerve and force seemed to desert him.

"You are tied fast there," said the young rough rider. "No use struggling."

"Why have you tied me in here? Why do you bring me here to this place?"

"A little idea of mine."

"You have me in your power, tied fast. Why did you not take me away with the others?"

"I had other plans for you."

"What does it mean? Why am I here? If you charge me with crimes, why do you not let me stand trial with a judge and jury? I am willing to face that."

"Are you? I prefer to have you here."

"Why? Why am I here?"

He looked fearfully around at the shadows that lay in all the corners of the cave.

"Why am I here in this dark place. I want to leave."

He struggled again.

Ted could see that what he had planned was taking place.

He was working on the nerves of this man.

He had no doubt that Rainsford had used this place often in the past.

He probably had been instrumental in killing his enemies here.

It was here that he had left Meyers to starve to death.

The thoughts of past deeds like this were crowding in on the mind of the criminal, who had defied the law for so long.

His courage was with him no more.

His anger had left him.

He was as pale as a ghost, as one of the ghosts of his victims that he imagined lurking in the dark shadows all around him.

"Let me out of here?" he cried. "I will go with you!"

"No, you won't go with me," said Ted. "You will stay here."

"Don't leave me here. It is inhuman."

"Is it? Listen to me! You left Meyers here."

"I know it! I know it! But don't leave me here!"

"You left Meyers here to starve. If it had been carried out as you planned, he probably would have been half dead with thirst by this time. You came here to see your work to-day."

"I came here to set him free."

"Don't lie to me, Rainsford. You came to find out something from him. You thought that he would be half crazed with the thirst, and would babble something that would help you to get possession of all his cattle."

Although the young rough rider had been guessing, he had hit upon the truth with surprising exactness.

Rainsford broke into a dismal groan.

"He would have been crazy now had it not been for your niece. She brought him food and drink. She saved him from you. Now you are in the same position that he was in."

"For Heaven's sake, don't leave me here."

"Why shouldn't I leave you here?"

"If you have any mercy in you at all, don't leave me here."

"You have not much mercy in you."

The young rough rider rose slowly to his feet and started to the door.

Rainsford broke into a shrill scream.

"Don't leave me—I am afraid—there are ghosts here!" he cried, struggling with the ropes as though he had gone crazy.

"If there are ghosts, they are of your own making."

"Come back—I will do anything you say. I will tell you anything you want. I know where all Meyers' stolen cattle have been driven. I know, and I alone, know where to find them."

"Where are they?"

"In the *mesa* corral—a secret corral at the end of my range."

"Does Meyers know how to reach it?"

"Yes; all his cattle are there. He can find them now. You have recovered them for him. I have told you. Don't leave me here."

"I will leave you here," said the young rough rider, slowly. "But I will come back for you——"

"Come back soon; I will go crazy here."

"I will come back on one condition."

"What is that? I will do it. I will do anything."

Ted pulled out of his pocket a note book and a pencil.

He tore off a sheet of the paper.

"Write a note to Tornado Tom, or whoever is in command of your ranch," he said.

"Tell them that you are detained on business for a few days. Tell them, also, that they are to drive the herd down to Simson for shipping. Tell them that Meyers is out of the way, and that there is no danger."

The young rough rider loosened the bonds of his prisoner and the frightened man wrote as he dictated.

Ted had accomplished his purpose.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### PREPARATION.

Two days later the inhabitants of Boise, the nearest railroad point to Simson, saw a sight that they will not soon forget.

The train that drew into the town that day held a number of young fellows who dismounted at the station with a great deal of noise and bustle.

There was a great similarity in all these boys.

They all were dressed in close-fitting khaki suits; they all wore leather leggins instead of boots; and all wore sombreros of the same shape and shade.

They were all sun browned.

Although some were stout and some thin, some short and some tall, there was a certain air about them all that stamped them as athletes—boys who could ride all day without fatigue, and who were used to shooting and throwing the lariat.

These were the young rough riders, the group of boys that Ted had organized into a regular company when he first came to the West.

For some time past they had all been at the Las Animas Ranch, in Texas, but now the young rough rider had called them together for a special mission.

Every boy had a web belt filled with cartridges and a revolver hanging at his hip.

The first man to leave the train was a wiry fellow with long, yellow hair.

This was Bud Morgan, an old cowboy, who had joined the young rough riders at the start.

"Hooray!" he yelled. "Ther young rough riders air gittin' ready ter go on ther trail. Git tergether, boys! We're goin' ter clean out ther town of Simson."

After him came a fat, chubby youth, who rolled over on the platform, falling over his own feet.

This was Carl Schwartz, a German member of the band. Behind Carl came Kit Summers, big Ben Tremont, Cole Carew, Perkins and all the other members of Ted's band of cowboys.

The young rough rider himself was the last to get out of the train.

With him was Launce Whipple, the Eastern youth, who had begged for the privilege of going on this expedition with the young rough riders.

Bessie Vernon was staying with an aunt of his in Texas.

He expected to make her his wife before he returned to the East.

"Now, boys," said Ted, when he got out on the platform and looked over his men. "Arrangements have been made to have horses for the whole of us here in a little while. Bud and Kit are detailed to go down to the stable to get the horses. We start in an hour. We ought to strike the town of Simson just at about dusk. Tom Dunton, the fellow who is running things in the absence of Rainsford has orders from Rainsford to get the herds together for delivery to a buyer just at about dusk. They will be driven down to the edge of the town then, and we can corral them all and drive them off to the Meyers ranch, where the greater part of them belong. There is proof that these cattle have been stolen and rebranded, so that we need not hesitate in taking possession of them."

Meyers met the young rough rider on the station platform a few moments later.

"Everything going smoothly?" he said.

"I got the boys here in good shape."

"Well, I have the horses for them. Did you see Rainsford."

"Rainsford is locked up in jail now, and I got some more information out of him to-day. That whole town of Simson was at his beck and call."

"I know that. I found that out, to my sorrow."

"And the only thing to do is to clean the whole place out."

"And if anyone can do it, the young rough riders can."

"I hope so. But here are the horses. It's time we started."

The horses were led up by some of the boys at this point, and assigned to those who were to ride them.

They were already saddled.

There was nothing for the riders to do but to arrange the stirrups to suit themselves.

This was soon accomplished, and each boy stood at attention at the head of his horse.

In the meantime a crowd, consisting of nearly every one in the town, had gathered to see the young rough riders start off on their expedition.

They had all heard of the young rough riders, and they were curious to see them.

They found them a fearless-looking, determined lot of fellows who certainly looked their reputation.

The perfect discipline that they kept and their prompt obedience to the commands of their leader, argued well for their success as a military organization.

"Prepare to mount!" said Ted, in ringing tones.

At once every boy grasped a lock of the mane with one hand and the bridle of his horse with the other.

Every left foot was placed in the stirrup, ready to spring into the saddle at the next command.

This was all done so speedily that it seemed all one motion.

"Mount!"

At the command, every boy rose in the air.

Every right leg was thrown over the back of the animal and slapped hard against the stirrup leather on the other side.

The young rough riders had swung into the saddle as one man.

"Column of twos, form!"

Scarcely was the command uttered, when the young rough riders were strung out in a faultless column of twos.

It was as perfect in alignment as though they had all been trained at West Point.

"Forward, march! Trot!"

At the last command the column moved briskly forward. Ted Strong, Meyers and Whipple rode in the lead.

Away it went, with a jingle of spur and a clatter of hoof, a great column of dust being thrown up in the rear.

The people who had seen the start broke into a loud cheer.

They had seen U. S. cavalry, but they had never seen anything better than this in point of military precision.

It was not long until the young rough riders left the town of Boise far behind and swung out across the prairie with the same steady trot at which they had started.

There was little talking in the ranks.

The young rough riders all knew that they had started on a serious undertaking, and that there might be hard fighting and plenty of danger for them all before the day was over.

Cleaning out a whole town is no easy matter, especially if the town be filled with frontier desperadoes and cattle rustlers of the most desperate character.

And yet there was a sort of delight in the heart of every one of the boys.

It was a long time since the young rough riders had been together on an expedition.

They all felt a sort of joy in the fact that they were joined once more, and riding off across the prairie into peril and danger.

It reminded them all of the old times, when the young rough riders had first been formed, and when they had run the Black Mountain Ranch.

In those days they had to fight for their very existence against cattle thieves and all sorts of bad men.

Yet when they came to look back at them afterward, they seemed anything but unhappy.

The ride across the prairie was a pleasure for every one of them.

It did not seem that any time had elapsed until the young rough rider called a halt.

"I am going to ride into this town alone," he said. "It lies just over the brow of the hill. Hold yourselves in readiness to charge in when you hear a revolver shot."

The young rough rider wheeled his horse, and rode forward alone, leaving the others behind him.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### CLEANING OUT A WHOLE TOWN.

On this particular afternoon there was a big crowd in the town of Simson.

Tom Dunton, the foreman of the Double X Ranch, had ordered that all the cattle on the range be driven down and corralled near the town.

He had received a letter giving him orders to that effect from Rainsford, the owner of the ranch.

Tom Dunton was not in a peculiarly good humor.

A few days before he had received a bullet wound in the shoulder and another in the arm.

He could ride a horse and give orders, but he could not handle cattle as well as usual.

Several of his men were also suffering from bullet wounds as reminders of the fight that they had had with the young rough rider a short time ago.

It took more of them than usual to get the herd down on the prairie adjoining Simson, and properly corralled there so that it would not stray.

After that there was little more to do with the cattle.

Several men were told off to ride around the herd and keep a watch over it.

Tornado Tom himself and the rest of his followers rode into the town.

They expected to meet their employer, Rainsford, there in a short time.

Not one of them dreamed that at that moment Rainsford was in jail awaiting trial for murder and cattle stealing.

They thought that he had disposed of these stolen herds in some way, and that after the sale which was to take place that afternoon they would all get their share of the proceeds.

After they had accomplished the hard work of getting the herd in the place where they had been ordered to drive it, they felt in a little better humor.

They rode into the town, shouting and firing their guns in the air.

They swarmed up the steps of the Phœnix Hotel, shouting out songs and calling loudly for drinks of whisky.

Simson was used to this sort of thing.

In the year that Rainsford had been running things with such a high hand there, it had degenerated into an out-and-out settlement of outlaws.

Meyers had been the only honest man who had exercised any authority in the vicinity.

He had been beaten by Rainsford.

He had disappeared—no one knew where—and it was well known that all his cattle had been stolen and added to the large herd that had already been gathered on the Double X Ranch.

All his cowboys had really been in the employ of Rainsford and his underling, Tornado Tom.

Since the disappearance of Meyers there had been perfect anarchy in the place.

He had been the only restraining influence.

Tornado Tom was seated on the porch of the Phœnix Hotel, when he suddenly leaped to his feet with a wild oath.

He pointed down the street with his left hand.

His right was in a sling.

"Look!" he cried. "Look what's comin'! Are my eyes telling me the truth? Is he crazy? What does it mean?"

The others looked, and burst into a wild yell of amazement.

Down the street came a well-built boy, mounted on a black horse.

He was dressed in khaki.

His sombrero was pushed back on his head, showing a resolute, sun-browned face.

In either hand he carried a long revolver.

The people in Simson had good reason to remember that boy.

He had put up the greatest fight that was ever seen there, a few days before.

The wounded men were all suffering from the effects of his bullets.

It was Ted Strong, the young rough rider.

He rode on and on, till he paused in front of the hotel.

He had practically the whole town before him.

It was built along one straggly street, as a good many of the smaller Western towns are, and the hotel was at the very end of it.

A dozen people on the porch leaped to their feet and ran down the steps.

But the boy spoke, and they all stood as if turned to stone.

"I have you all covered," he said, swinging his gleaming revolvers in all directions, so that each man felt that one of the muzzles was covering him.

"The first man that reaches for a gun gets a bullet."

"What do you want here?" shouted Tornado Tom, in a hoarse voice.

"Ah, there you are!" said the young rough rider. "I hoped to see you here. You ask me what I want here. You remember that before I left here the other day that I told you that I would come back presently and clean out the whole town. Perhaps you remember my saying that. I made that promise. I try to keep my promises, too. I have come back to keep that one to-day."

The people who heard this speech could scarcely believe their ears.

This boy had barely escaped with his life the last time he had been there.

A bullet from any one of them would lay him low.

He had not a friend in the place.

There was not a man there who did not wish for the death of the young rough rider.

He was the natural enemy of all outlaws and crooks.

They felt that while he was alive they were in constant danger.

It seemed absolutely inconceivable that he would ride in there against the whole crowd.

Tornado Tom, for a moment, was too surprised to speak.

He did not make any move to draw a gun.

Nor did any of his followers.

They knew that the young rough rider was the champion dead-shot of the West, and that he would keep his word in regard to the shooting.

"Do you know that there are enough men here to eat you?" he asked.

"I see quite a crowd here," said the young rough rider, coolly. "But I don't think that they are going to do very much eating this afternoon."

"What do you want here?"

"You, for one thing—and a lot of your followers, for the rest."

"Are you crazy?"

"I don't think so."

"You'll never leave this town alive."

"I'm sorry to hear you talk that way—I am forced to disagree with you."

Tornado Tom, like most of his followers, had laid aside his belt of arms when he entered the hotel.

The young rough rider could see that they were all at a little distance from their arms and unprepared for an attack.

That was the reason that he had ridden up so fearlessly.

He knew, however, that he could not hold this crowd at bay very long.

He determined to tell them the state of things.

He wished to have them surrender with as little bloodshed as possible.

That was why he had chosen to ride into the town alone.

"There is no use in trying to resist me— "

There was a burst of laughter from the crowd, who thought that the boy had suddenly gone crazy.

But Ted went on in a voice that could be heard above all the laughter.

"I did not come alone. There are enough men to clean out the place over the top of that hill behind me. At a signal from me, they will charge right down into you, and there will be a lot of you hurt. I give you this chance."

"He lies!" cried Tornado Tom, in a hoarse voice. "Our cattle and their watchers are over that hill."

"Your cattle are now in the hands of the young rough riders," said Ted, coolly.

"You are crazy."

"The men whom you placed in charge of them are prisoners."

There was a roar of astonishment from the crowd.

"Rainsford himself is a prisoner on trial for murder."

By this time the people in the town were beginning to look at each other in fear.

Tornado Tom could see that the young rough rider had them scared.

He leaped upon a chair, and addressed them:

"Boys," he said, "you have let this fellow ride in here and bluff you. If what he said is true, he's the man that is responsible for it. Shake him off his horse and hang him to the first tree."

The words acted like magic on the crowd.

Its surprise and fear seemed to change to anger.

There was a wild yell of rage, and the men surged down the steps toward the young rough rider.

Ted fired twice, and two men rolled over.

Tornado Tom himself fell in a heap with a wound in the leg.

At the same time there was a shot fired here and there in the crowd.

The spell was broken, and with a wild yell the people charged straight at this fearless boy.

At the same time a shriller, fiercer yell arose in the air behind Ted.

It was the battle cry of the young rough riders.

Over the top of the hill, with a rolling thunder of hoofs, appeared a long line of mounted figures.

Every boy held a revolver in his hand.

They charged straight for the crowd.

Ted watched them coming, and dashed forward himself.

"Fire!" he yelled.

A splitting volley rent the air.

The ruffians scattered and fell in all directions.

Headlong into them, right through them, with Ted in the lead, swept the line of the young rough riders.

After that charge there was little more needed to frighten the people of the place into submission.

They were covered by the weapons of some of the boys, while others went around among them and disarmed them.

The next day a sheriff arrived to take charge of a band of thirty prisoners whom the young rough riders had captured.

And now, if you chance to visit Simson, you will find it one of the most quiet and law abiding towns in the West.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 48, will contain "The Young Rough Rider's Girl Guide; or, The Maid of the Mountains."

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